

HOT TIPS FROM MARKETING EXPERTS

THE WRITER[®]

A GUIDE
TO LITERARY
AGENTS

IMAGINE
WRITE
PUBLISH

Colum McCann

on the big power
of the short story

STEPS for
a book launch

A TOOL KIT for
searchable phrases

HOW TO tame
calendar chaos

» Read the 1st place
winner of our
short story contest

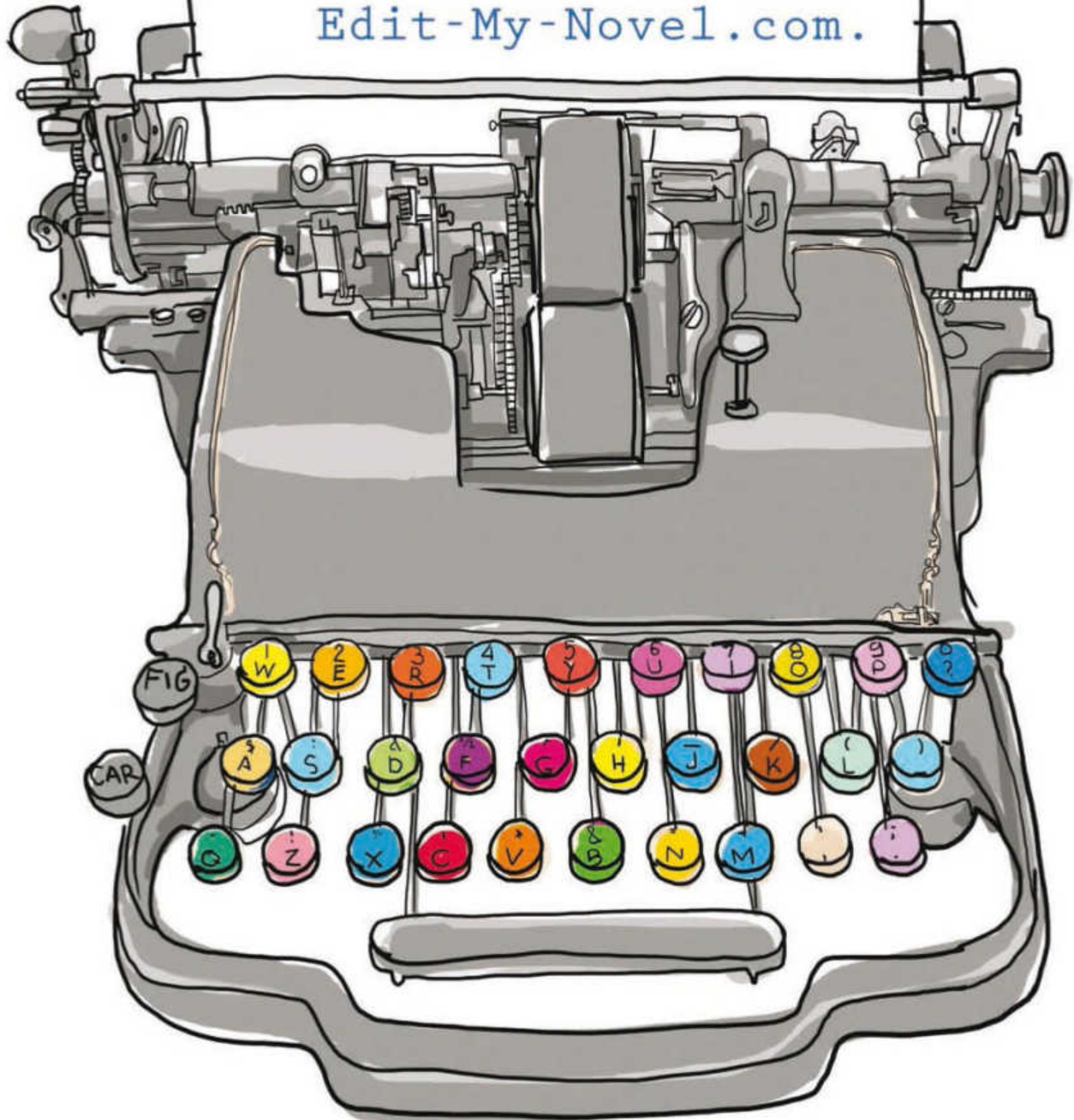


Erica Jong
Katherine Heiny
Megan Mayhew Bergman

MARCH 2016

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Photo by Jake Belcher for *The Writer*

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Each October, I have the privilege of collaborating with the Boston Book Festival team on the One City One Story program. I read submissions and help choose the story that will engage the entire city with themes, characters and plot. Then the author and I take the stage during the festival for a town hall-style group conversation.

Discussing a story with its creator and the general reading public (rather than a book group or students) is a powerful experience. I've watched each year as authors – Richard Russo, Tom Perrotta, Jennifer Haigh, Rishi Reddi and Jennifer De Leon – marvel as a passionate audience dissects their work, forms theories and asks thoughtful questions about the story and the writing life.

That's why I am always delighted when *The Writer* hosts a short story contest such as Two Roads Diverge, the outcome of which is represented in this issue. We asked Colum McCann, short story practitioner and best-selling novelist, to read the top 10 entries and choose four winners. You can read his winning selection in these pages and the other three winners online at writermag.com.

Key for me, however, is publishing new works of fiction for a wide reading audience. We don't often get to do that in these pages, and I hope you appreciate the deep dive we take into the genre – craft interviews with McCann, Caroline Bock (first-place winner) and cross-genre author Megan Mayhew Bergman. Our commitment to supporting original work grows out of my Boston Book Festival experience, where I see in real time the hunger readers have both to read stories and to understand their provenance.

In addition to the short story theme of this issue, you'll find many pieces on marketing your work, whether you're putting together a promotional strategy or looking for a literary agent.

If you're on the path to publishing – a short story, perhaps – we wish you success, and we hope you consider our magazine a supporting partner.

Alicia Anstead

Alicia Anstead
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



Alicia Anstead interviewed short story writer Jennifer De Leon at the Boston Book Festival in October 2015.

Jake Belcher/The Writer

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"Sometimes, the experts forget they were once beginners. You must be gentle with beginners; they have great potential to be experts." – Lailah Gifty Akita

JUST WAIT

A short story rejected in grade school becomes a cause of action.

BY PAMELA JANE

In elementary school, back in the 1950s, we were never given writing assignments, and I never imagined there were any living authors. I pictured a cemetery filled with tombstones of my favorite writers with their last names first, like card catalogs in the library: Baum, L. Frank 1856-1919.

Writing – the pleasure of articulating interior worlds sensed but not seen – was something I did on my own. I was in eighth grade before I got a chance to write a story for school.

My eighth-grade English teacher, Mr. Mortem, was a malevolent-looking man with a low brow and small beady eyes. We joked that he moonlighted as an axe murderer. But he was even scarier as an English teacher. He terrorized us with menacing-sounding exams called "evaluations," which turned out to be ordinary multiple-choice tests. But he was the first teacher to give us an assignment to write a short story.

"Remember," Mr. Mortem called as we filed out of class, "no stories from TV!"

I hardly heard him. I was too excited about getting started.

At home that night, I rolled a fresh piece of paper into my

typewriter and began a story about a mute boy living in an 18th-century seaport. In the story, the boy discovers a crack in the mast of a great sailing ship docked in the harbor. He tries to warn the townsfolk, but they dismiss him as an idiot. In the end, he steals aboard the majestic ship before it sails, choosing to die rather than live in a world that so completely misunderstands him.

Until then, all I'd written in Mr. Mortem's class were checkmarks on multiple-choice tests. I imagined the look on his face when he discovered I was a brilliant writer.

A few weeks later, Mr. Mortem returned our stories. When he came to my desk, he stopped.

"You didn't write this," he said, holding up my work.

"Yes, I did," I said. But my voice sounded very small, and Mr. Mortem looked big. He also looked like he was enjoying himself.

"I don't believe you." His voice was hard, accusing.

The classroom was quiet. Everyone was watching, waiting to see what would happen next. Mr. Mortem leaned over, his eyes boring into mine. "I'm going to keep this story so you won't try to use it again in high school," he said.

I couldn't find the words to explain that I would never "use" a story again when there were so many new ones waiting to be written.

Mr. Mortem grudgingly gave me an "A," although he didn't believe I wrote the story about the boy no one believed. Inside, I was seething.

Just wait. Someday I'll be a real writer. Then you'll be sorry.

Four years later, on the last day of high school, my chemistry teacher stopped me in the crowded hallway. By this time, my stories, poems and beginnings of bad novels had appeared in the school paper, but I had flunked chemistry class.

To my surprise, Mr. Welch smiled. "I'm not worried about



your chemistry grade, Pamela,” he said, “because I know that someday I’m going to have your books on my shelf.”

I was stunned – 1965 had not been a good year; my parents were divorcing and selling our house, and now I had flunked out of Chem II. The fact that my dad was a renowned scientist admired by my teacher didn’t help.

“My life is a failure, as a life,” I wrote to my best friend Debbie, who was away at college, “but as a screwed-up mess, it’s a brilliant success.”

Yet here was Mr. Welch telling me he was going to have my books on his shelf one day.

Twenty-one years later, in the fall of 1986, I walked down the long dirt driveway of the farm where I lived with my husband, past glowing maple trees to the mailbox where I found a large brown envelope from my publisher. I tore it open, my heart pounding. There it was – my first book – a living, palpable object I could hold in my hands, the child of so much heartbreak, despair and love. I couldn’t wait to see it in the bookstores with the other Christmas books for children. But that would come later. At that moment, I just wanted to hug it. And after that, I wanted to call Mr. Arrick, my much-loved creative writing teacher from high school. I told him my news, and we talked for a while. Then I asked him if he remembered Mr. Mortem. The two teachers had taught

“SOMEDAY I’M GOING TO HAVE YOUR BOOKS ON MY SHELF.”

together in junior high school before Mr. Arrick moved to the high school.

“Sure, I remember Chuck,” he said. “He got drunk and killed himself years ago.”

For a moment I was speechless.

“He killed himself?” I said finally.

“Yeah, he fell down his basement stairs and broke his neck. He was a closet alcoholic, you know.”

I couldn’t believe it. All those years I’d hated him and worked to get even, and he had been dead.

My chemistry teacher had given me the incalculable gift of a generous, unearned faith when he predicted that he would one day have my books on his shelf. But Mr. Mortem had given me a no less potent charm – a gritty determination to prove he was wrong.

I sent the first copy of my book to Mr. Welch, the chemistry teacher, and reminded him of what he had said in the high school hallway in 1965. He wrote back to tell me that he had read my letter in his retirement speech.

Then he went home and put my book on his shelf.

Pamela Jane’s children’s books include *Noelle of the Nutcracker*, *Little Goblins Ten* and *Little Elfie One*. Her work has appeared in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Antigonish Review* and *Literary Mama*. Her memoir *An Incredible Talent for Existing: A Writer’s Story* will be published this year.

WRITERS ON WRITING

Erica Jong

Erica Jong’s groundbreaking 1973 novel *Fear of Flying* was an instant best-seller and a cultural touchstone upon publication. Noted for its forthright exploration of female sexuality, it has now sold more than 27 million copies in 43 languages. Since its release, Jong has published more than 20 books of fiction, nonfiction and poetry. Her latest novel is *Fear of Dying*. It follows a year in the life of 60-year-old Vanessa Wonderman as she grapples with issues surrounding sex, mortality and aging.

WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSON YOU’VE LEARNED ABOUT WRITING?

My most important lesson as a

writer is: Forget about trends and write from your heart. Write the book that you absolutely must write. Don’t try to outthink the best seller list.

HOW HAS THIS HELPED YOU AS A WRITER?

Being an artist is always uncertain. The only thing you have to go on is your strong gut feeling about what you need to express. Too many young writers think they can psych the marketplace. This is a dead end. As a writer you are only as valuable as your passion.

—Gabriel Packard is the associate director of the creative writing MFA program at Hunter College in New York City.



MaryAnn Haltin

SELL YOURSELF

We asked marketing experts for their top tip to make your book sales soar.

“Invest in a proper edit and a good cover, price your work competitively, run regular 99-cents sales, advertise on reader sites, start a mailing list this second if you don’t have one already and make damn sure that the sign-up is the very first thing readers see after ‘The End.’”

—David Gaughran, *Let’s Get Digital: How to Self-Publish and Why You Should*

“Start as early as possible and develop a written marketing plan that’s specifically tailored to the book and the target audience. Ideally, authors should start building an audience and online following before they even begin writing.”

—Dana Lynn Smith, CreateYourBookMarketingPlan.com

“Reach out to media outlets, and offer yourself as a guest. The media can reach thousands of potential book buyers at once. You can’t beat it for helping you spread your messages, establish your credibility and let people know about your book. Promotion via the media works.”

—Stacey J. Miller, S. J. Miller Communications

ASK THE WRITER

I’m confused about how to reveal direct thought in first person. Can it be included with the rest of the narrative? Or should I use italics?

A first-person narration is filtered through the narrator’s perspective and told using the narrator’s voice. As a result, first person is often moving swiftly between observation, thought, description of action and more. *All* of this is coming from the narrator’s consciousness. Let’s take a closer look.

In Raymond Carver’s short story “Cathedral,” the narrator’s wife has a friend from her past come to visit – a blind man named Robert. The narrator is uncomfortable with this. Late that evening, the wife goes upstairs to change, leaving the narrator and Robert alone.

After she’d left the room, he and I listened to the weather report and then to the sports roundup. By that time, she’d been gone so long I didn’t know if she was going to come back. I thought she might have gone to bed. I wished she’d come back downstairs. I didn’t want to be left alone with a blind man. I asked him if he wanted another drink, and he said sure.

This passage starts with a report of what happened – they listened to the weather and sports – then transitions into the narrator’s thoughts about his wife’s intentions and his wish that she return. Then the passage moves back to the action, summarizing this time: “I asked him if he wanted another drink, and he said sure.” There’s no need to set his thoughts off with formatting or punctuation. They’re a part of the natural unfolding of his experience of the moment.

There are certainly some instances in which italicizing thought may make sense. In Tom Paine’s short story “The Anarchist Convention,” the narrative unfolds as if the youthful narrator is recounting the events to a friend.

Late that night there are these loons going by in the moonlight, just riding the raging Mississippi, and I think, *that’s me and my life, I’m one of those loons*. It sounds corny and all, but at the time Bugeye and I were into it and we made loon calls until we passed out.

Here, the narrator’s thoughts aren’t simply unfolding. Instead, he’s deliberately pointing out the thought, summing up what may have been a complex experience in straightforward, direct language. Compare that with this excerpt later in the story.

Then we seemed to wake up and we were in the Rockies. Man, those are some serious mountains. Like I’m beginning to get a sense of how big this country is, you know.

Again, we get the narrator’s thoughts, but this time, the narrator isn’t pointing the thought out; he’s simply having it. And that’s often enough to indicate a thought.

—Brandi Reissenweber teaches fiction writing and reading fiction at Gotham Writers Workshop.

Notes from the blogosphere

NAME

Joanna Penn

YEARS BLOGGING

7

GENRE

Book publishing expert

WEBSITE

thecreativepenn.com

Can a blog help with a book deal or with book sales?

If you can bring a large, ready-made audience to publishers, then of course they will want to publish a book with you. This is most common in the nonfiction niches. In terms of help with book sales, you can essentially build up an email list and an audience that want to hear from you through your blog and content marketing. When your book is ready, all you have to do is announce it to your list. This is how I launch my own books straight into the best-seller lists, because I have built up an audience over many years.

Your blog posts tend to be long. Is there an advantage to that?

We are all drowning in content online, so my intention is to provide top quality articles that solve a problem for authors and round up lots of information in

one place. I write long posts that take many hours to write. Top quality information that stands the test of time will always be shared, bookmarked and read because it's useful.

A short post can be effective if it is inspiration, information or entertainment created for your audience. But I'm not offering two-minute entertaining videos on my site. I'm offering a path for writers to follow, and there's a lot to learn. Bloggers will need to decide what suits them and what they want to offer their audience over time. Consistency is so important.

Readability and layout can be an issue for blogs. Any tips?

"Great artists steal," as Picasso said, and this is what I've done with my site and what I recommend others do, too. I've been following a number of top bloggers for years, and when they make a design change, I incorporate that into my site as well.

People increasingly scan content online and then slow down to re-read anything that catches their eye, so you need to design the page so it is scannable and also full of eye-catching images. Use sub-heads to break up the page and draw attention to particular aspects of the article.

Again, this is very different from writing a book, which is why so many authors struggle with blogging. They haven't considered that it is a form of writing that includes design as well as copy-writing skills. But by modeling and learning from others, a few tweaks will make your site much more readable and shareable.

READY TO SELL YOUR BOOK? START HERE.

1 DETERMINE what you are capable of doing and identify what you would like to do to promote your book. Plan at least six months prior to your book launch and then execute each step. Hire someone to do things you know you won't get to do – because of time, ability or preference.

2 DIVERSIFY your PR campaign just as one does with a financial portfolio. Do as many types of media as possible: social media, radio, TV and print. Vary between local and national media. Target specific subject areas that match with your book reader demographics. Don't rely on just one type of media.

3 WRITE A BOOK that is actually marketable. This means not only should the book be well-written, timely and appealing to the masses, but [it should also] include specifics that appeal to niche markets and specialized media.

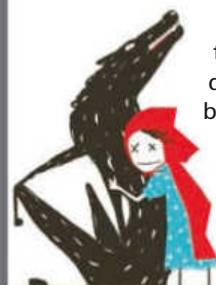
—Brian Feinblum, creator and author of bookmarketingbuzzblog.blogspot.com

Writing Prompt

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Choose a favorite character from childhood and flash forward to today. Where is this person now, and what kind of a life does he or she live? Has his or her storybook past had any effect on current everyday life? Perhaps Goldilocks wound up in the pen for serial breaking and entering. Or maybe Mr. Mouse had one cookie too

many. Use your imagination to see a stark difference between then and now. Employ flashbacks if necessary.



Want to know Penn's secret to creating posts that get thousands of shares? Download the digital edition now.



* "Fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so slightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners." —Virginia Woolf

To e-be

If you don't have a website, do you exist in the publishing world? After all, the first thing many editors and agents do is Google you. No web presence? No link trail? No go, pal. Setting up a website may be easier than you think. These five DIY website creators can help get the job done and support your success.

►WEEBLY

weebly.com

Create a website on the go from a phone or tablet using the Weebly app, or log in from a computer to build the old-fashioned way. No matter where users work, progress will be synced across all devices, including while in offline mode. The free edition provides unlimited pages and hosting, plus access to themed templates. Packages run up to \$25 per month, offering elements such as site stats, multimedia and fully-integrated eCommerce. The blog post editor allows for easy posting and responding to comments, while the form builder customizes information collected from site visitors.

►YOLA

yola.com

Many of the free website builders imbed third-party advertisements onto your page, but not Yola. Create an ad-free site with customizable templates that feature drag-and-drop design, social sharing, YouTube and Tumblr compatibility, site statistics and contact forms. The paid packages publish to Facebook, make the site mobile-friendly and record SEO data. An online store can be added for an additional monthly fee. Those with little time or confidence can contract the design team to build a site, while advanced users can get into the code themselves to personalize the templates.

►VOOG

edicy.com

Reach a global audience by making a multilingual site. Voog's websites come with a tool that translates content into 15 languages. Packages start at under \$10 after the 30-day free trial and allow for three users and 30 pages, plus a custom domain. Self-hosting options are also available. All sites include analytics tools and are mobile-friendly, and the available templates feature clean layouts that make images the star of the show.

►MOONFRUIT

moonfruit.com

Drag-and-drop software makes creating and editing your site easy, even for those with little website-building experience. A site built on a computer automatically formats to fit every platform, from tablets to smartphones, and built-in plugins make it easy to share content on social media. The free version includes web hosting, a shop to sell books, Google Analytics and Google Webmaster Tools, plus multiple design templates and backgrounds. Upgrading to the premium package provides multiple site administrators, Getty Images, mobile checkout and free domain names.

►WIX

wix.com

Choose from one of nine general business categories, including "Creative Arts," for which more than 500 ready-made design templates exist. Once you've selected a favorite, drag and drop the elements and add text and images to create the website that will best represent your brand. Other design features include adding a video background, incorporating 3D elements and access to millions of stock images. Outfit the site with nearly every component imaginable by accessing over 200 compatible apps. Also available: a contact manager, email marketing, storefront, event ticket sales and SEO help.





WHERE IN THE WORLD IS THE WRITER?



◀ Anna Leahy drafted and revised poems and essays during a three-week residency at Dorland Mountain Arts Colony in California.

▶ Off the coast of Southern France, a cruise ship stateroom balcony became a sanctuary for Karen Lea Germain.



WHERE DO YOU READ THE WRITER?
Send a photo of yourself and a short description of the location to tweditorial@madavor.com.

Writing Prompts

In the spirit of Alfred Hitchcock's thriller *Rear Window*, create a short story in which a character is confined to one room in an apartment building. Why is he or she stuck? What intrigue takes place outside the window? Or is the intrigue internal? Concentrate on building drama with as few characters as possible. Try crafting the story first as a monologue. Then switch to third person to discover more about character, plot, motive and scene.



IN THE MARKET

Completing a book is a triumph. Having it sell kicks it up a notch. Social media is full of the struggles and excitement of book marketing, as well as tips for creating a marketing campaign. We enjoyed the following MTs.



Caroline Knox @CXonk

I finally have my first copy of my book! Hoping to sell it through farm shops so marketing campaign starts soon!



Mojca Mars @mojcamars

My book is still selling and I'm not even doing marketing. Wondering what will happen after I start doing marketing.



Ryan @ryanfield

To really show your gratitude to readers keep your e-books priced fairly ALL the time. #indieauthor



Aimee Coveney @authordesigner

Your #authorwebsite is more vital than you think. Readers, agents etc expect an eye catching, professional design. #writingtip #indieauthor



BB Gallagher @bb_gallagher

Got my first scathing review! Now I feel like a real author! #ammarketing #ya #yalit #bookreview



C.L. Wells @clwellsauthor

Promotion is a monster that most new authors don't realize is hiding under their laptops. #ammarketing #amwriting #RAWR



Ann Anderson @Andersonista

Didn't sell my novel with an agent, now marketing on my own. Requests for fulls! This path looks promising. #amwriting #ammarketing



Craig Terlson @cterlson

That being said, most writers twitter feeds can be summarized: buy my book, buy my book #buymybook I'll try not to be that. #writing

The fix

Be ready for critiques of your work.

OK, I admit it: I'm thin-skinned. Problem is: I want to make it in the cold, hard world of publishing. Some people might think I need to grow a thicker skin. I'm not so sure I do.

My favorite coping mechanism is avoidance. As an MFA student, I tried to avoid any faculty member with a reputation for being blunt. No sharp edges for me. I wanted my criticism in a warm, fuzzy blanket.

The gods of faculty-student matching seemed to be listening. They paired me with one of those earthy-crunchy faculty members who did guided meditations before writing. Perfect! Little did I know she would respond to my manuscript with what's known to some in the business as the "shit sandwich." My eyes went straight from the positive comments on the outside to the less appealing matter in the middle. The mom in my story, she said, was a "cardboard character."

Ouch. Why did she have to put it that way?

I'm sure she didn't mean to be

unkind. "Cardboard character" is a standard literary term, after all. I knew in theory how to turn flat characters into three-dimensional ones, but, like so many things, it's easier said than done. So I screwed up my courage and asked my faculty advisor if we could set up a time to talk by phone.

As I waited for her response, I went into panic mode. What if she said, "Kiddo, this is graduate school. Figure it out yourself." I didn't want her to think I was too "needy." Thin-skinned, yes. A leech, no. Still, I needed help.

Fortunately, she agreed to the phone call. In the course of chatting, she offered a suggestion that was so wise and practical I felt like I'd just savored the perfect chocolate. She suggested I write a new scene pairing the mom with another character from the book. My new scene brought out my mom's softer side, which is just what I wanted.


I'd like to say this new scene fixed all my problems, but I'd be lying. My next faculty advisor commented that my mom was "under-developed."

Ah, "under-developed." Such a lovely, neutral term. So much softer than "cardboard." I just needed to develop the mom more, which I knew meant adding some vivid details. I decided to give my super-achieving mom a taste for junky books, magazines and TV shows. Much better.

But I fantasized about having a new, thicker skin sewn into my graduation gown. Maybe then I'd be ready for those blunt-talking literary agents and editors. I mentioned this to one of my workshop leaders, who shook her head and said, "If we keep telling writers to get thicker skins, nothing will change."

I agree. It's time for us thin-skinned writers of the world to unite. Here's my five-point manifesto:

1. If you get criticism that feels vague and insulting, ask for ways the critiquer can make it more constructive.
2. Don't settle for the line, "It's your story; fix it yourself." Even the most accomplished writers need help at times.
3. Be respectful of your critiquer's time.
4. Be diplomatic and tactful in all your dealings.
5. Choose words carefully for a kinder, gentler world of literary criticism.

It all boils down to what my mom used to tell me as a young child. "It's not what you say; it's how you say it." We as writers – no matter how thin our skin – deserve supportive, practical advice. That's what I got. Now it's time for me to pay it forward. 

Joan Axelrod-Contrada is the author of more than 15 books for children and young adults. She's a 2015 graduate of the MFA program in Writing for Children and Young Adults at Vermont College of Fine Arts.



Out of the shell

Don't let being an introvert stop success.

Many authors are introverts. When they hear the words “book promotion,” they want to hide in the nearest closet. But we all know books don't sell themselves, so authors need to connect with readers. But it's important to be true to yourself, too.

“Don't try to force yourself into a persona that isn't you,” says book publicist Lorna Garona. “People will likely see through it, and you will exhaust yourself.”

Garona also notes the importance of setting reasonable goals. “Don't cram your schedule with marketing tasks that feel like chores,” she advises. “Pick one or two that you are comfortable with and work them smartly.”

Authors should take control of marketing and promoting their books, says public relations specialist Susan Schwartzman. “If you are an introvert and don't relish the idea of going on TV and doing a book and media tour, then you should consider doing a virtual tour,” she says. “Blog about your book on various websites. Use social media such as Twitter. Think of Twitter as a virtual cocktail party.”

Jocelyn Kelley, of Kelley and Hall Book Publicity and Promotion, agrees that using online platforms and social media are great tools for authors who may not want to be out in the public eye. “For introverts, social media is especially beneficial, because it provides them with outlets where they can reach a large audience from their computers,” Kelley says. “If you prefer writing to speaking, these channels work best and provide amazing opportunities.”



Here are 15 tools and ideas that make marketing easier for introverts.

1 Bookarma: Allows you to leverage the social networks of other authors on the platform. Upload your books and create a campaign. The books will appear in the Book Queue for other authors to see and share with their social networks. The more you share and talk about other books, the higher your Karma points become, making your book more visible. bookarma.net

2 Fussy Librarian: Authors pay a small fee to have their book featured in a daily email sent to subscribers, featuring book deals geared specifically toward their preferences. thefussylibrarian.com

3 Guest blogging: Research blogs that your ideal reader visits and contact the hosts to ask about being a guest blogger. Have some story ideas ready.

4 Launch team: Round up a team of people with pre-existing connections to a variety of circles that can support you and your book. Give them a free copy and ask them to help spread the word.

5 Facebook author party: Set a date and time for this free, real-time event on Facebook. Send out invitations, and then during the party, interact with your readers through chats, giveaways and fun discussions.

6 Speak to small groups and organizations: Linda Osmundson, author of the *How the West Was Drawn* picture book series, says she is an introvert when it comes to book signings and events, but she enjoys speaking to small groups. “I have a love for my subject and I'm told it shows,” says Osmundson. “These speaking engagements can lead to more opportunities.” Find local organizations such as the Rotary Club, a writing group at the library or a mom's group, and offer to be a guest speaker.

7 Goodreads discussions: Create a discussion question about your book's theme, characters or any other interesting aspect that will prompt reader interaction. Post it on the discussion tab found on the Goodreads home page and stand by to participate in the dialogue.

8 Book clubs: Contact local book clubs to arrange an author visit or Skype chat.

9 Shared book event: Remember the phrase “strength in numbers”? Join forces with other authors to host an event to connect with current and potential readers. Include activities, prizes, contests, music, local performers, crafts, food, drinks and, of course, your books.

10 Magazine articles: Pitch article ideas to magazines targeted to your ideal reader. If possible, include a bio with your book title at the end of the article.

11 Monthly email newsletter: Build an email list through a post on your Facebook page or a form on your website. The newsletter should include useful articles, inspiration, resources,

information and fun tidbits, along with news about your book.


12 Celebrate your readers: On your author website or Facebook page, highlight one of your readers with a short profile and photo, and maybe even give them a small gift to show your appreciation.

13 Charity fundraiser: Run a special deal either online or at an event, pledging a portion of your book’s sales to charity. Ask the organization to share the event details with their supporters.

14 Radio shows: Contact radio shows and offer to do a phone interview about your book or a related topic on which your book makes you an expert. Because it is over the phone, you can forget about all of the ears tuning in

and focus on having a simple phone call with one person. Prepare talking points for easy reference.

15 Books on the Subway: This program gets books into the hands of readers riding the New York City subways. You send copies to the organizer, she puts an official sticker on them and displays them as free to be enjoyed and returned for others to read. booksonthesubway.com

Marketing your book doesn’t have to be intimidating or scary. By finding a few avenues you are comfortable with and devoting your time and energy to those, even the most introverted authors will find success. 

Kerrie Flanagan is executive director of Northern Colorado Writers and author of *Write Away: A Year of Musings and Motivations for Writers*.

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Word key

How seriously should you consider searchable words?



It's a freelance writer's nightmare. Your client assigns you a series of web articles – and includes a mile-long list of required SEO keywords to use in your content.

Writing concise, quality web content is difficult enough without being handed a list of mandatory keywords. You're trying to write for *people*, not robots, and shoe-horning someone else's words into your writing can seem an impossible task.

Your clients have good intentions: They want to make sure that searchers can find, read and appreciate your work. They're assuming that if they feed Google certain clues (i.e. keywords), Google will get a clear sense of what your content is about and what it aims to accomplish.

Unfortunately, people too often get hung up on playing to search algorithms that they forget that they're writing for humans.

Assuming that rising to the top of Google rankings is as simple as feeding it a plethora of optimized keyphrases is a gross oversimplification of one of the

most sophisticated tech companies on the planet.

Worse, it makes for bad writing.

Writing for people, not robots

Let's say 50,000 people search for writing contests in any given month. *The*

Writer happens to have a writing contest database on our website. So as long as we pepper our Contests page on writermag.com with variations of the phrase "writing contests," Google will know what we're all about, right?

Wrong.

Let's say we write this type of copy:

The Writer magazine maintains an extensive list of writing contests. These best writing contests serve as the best contests for writers. We hope you

like these good writing contests for writers. Come back for more writing contests updates!

Google is going to penalize us for keyword stuffing. Google knows that no one naturally uses the same exact phrase four times in four sentences.

But more important, no one's going to want to read our site. And that sends a stronger message to the search engines than a few keywords ever will.

How Google works

Search engines have one focus: Help the user find what he or she is looking for. They're like dating sites, matching searchers to the content that best meets their needs, and they use multiple factors to accomplish this.

Such as:

► **Relevant content.** Google is sophisticated enough now to recognize

CLIENT A STICKLER FOR KEYWORDS? TRY THESE TIPS.

- Use your computer's Find tool (control + F on PCs, command + F for Macs) and count how many times you used your keyphrase in your text naturally. Coming up short? Look for pronouns and try to replace them with your key phrase. After all, "They" or "It" send zero signals to Google; "freelance writers" or "grammar" does.
- Slip keywords into your subheads. (Subheads break up your content and create eye-catching white space for web readers, so they're vital even if you're not trying to add more keywords.)
- Add keywords to your images' alt text. (Google can't read pictures. Alt text is SEO-speak for the data that tells Google what your image is about.) You should be able to enter this in your site's publishing platform, such as WordPress.

synonyms and related content. If you say “Boston-based freelance writer” or “writer working mainly in Boston,” Google lists your website for a search for “Boston freelance writer” or “freelance writer in Boston,” even if you don’t use those exact phrases.

► **Links.** Links from other websites and social media users are a bit like votes in the Internet popularity contest. The more reputable sites that link to your website, the more Google has reason to trust your content as relevant and authoritative.

► **Bounce rate.** If searchers click on your site and *immediately* click the back button (or “bounces”), they obviously didn’t find what they were searching for. This tells Google your article isn’t the best possible answer to a searcher’s question.

These are just some of the multiple

GOOGLE KNOWS THAT NO ONE NATURALLY USES THE SAME EXACT PHRASE FOUR TIMES IN FOUR SENTENCES.

factors Google considers when ranking sites in search engine result pages – SERPs. In other words, it ain’t just about keywords anymore.


The real value of keywords

The real value in keyword research lies in finding out what interests your readers. If so many people are searching for writing contests, as a magazine, we can deliver quality, valuable content

about writing contests. Not because we want to rise to the top of the SERPs, but because that’s a proven subject that our readers want to know about.

Researching popular keywords shouldn’t be a game to beat Google. It should be about giving readers what they want.

So go back to your list of keywords. Think about the question the searcher is really asking when he or she types that keyphrase into Google.com. Then set your list of keywords aside, and write valuable, meaningful content that you think answers that question.

Your client hired you to write content for people, not search engines. Write for them first. The robots will follow. 

Nicki Porter is a contributing editor at *The Writer*.

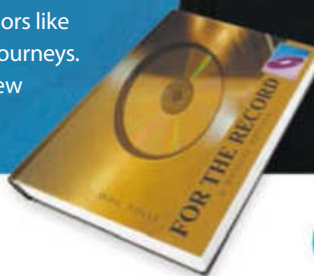
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Don Tolle, Author of *For the Record*

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INTERVIEW BY
ALICIA ANSTEAD

PHOTOS BY
JAKE BELCHER

Literary

t r e a t y

Colum
McCann

writes
novels
and short
stories.

Both
genres
express
an internal
autobio-
graphical
truth.
Here's how
he does it.



Colum McCann's short stories have a quiet shock value. They are deeply contemplative and mercilessly sharp. They start with small images and build to global issues and suspenseful narratives.

In "Treaty," a story in a quartet of works in his collection *Thirteen Ways of Looking*, an elderly Irish nun is traumatized when, on a TV newscast, she sees that a man who raped her nearly 40 years ago in South America has become a prominent member of a peace treaty panel at an institute in London.

The story is a portrait of a woman whose body is the site of a powerful wrongdoing, one that has shaped her emotional, spiritual and professional world over the decades. As the nun's story delicately unfolds, the world itself becomes implicated as a breeding ground for violence against the body, against the sacred. But then McCann allows for an unexpected moment of human connection – not between the rapist and the nun, but in a final empathetic scene between the nun and another man. The pain that is so relentless in this story does not dissipate, but it is mitigated with the tiniest flash of grace.

McCann was the guest judge for *The Writer's* short story contest Two Roads Diverge, based on quotes from two of his remarkable works of fiction *TransAtlantic* and *Let the Great World Spin*, which won the 2009 National Book Award. From a group of 10 final submissions, he chose Caroline Bock's "Gargoyles and Stars" – coincidentally also about an elderly woman struggling with the collision of memory and loss. You can read her story in this issue. You can also read an excerpt from "Treaty" in these pages.

I asked McCann about his process for writing short stories and for imagining the worlds he creates in fiction. Our exchange follows. His thoughts are among the most compelling I've received about the craft of writing.

When you're working on a short story, what is the process for policing the length, particularly as a novelist?

I think a story, when properly told, finds its own natural length. If you try to extend it too much, it just stretches and begins to bore, and if you try to compress it too much, it just fractures. So you just hope that you can find the right rhythm. It's a musical thing. You feel it out, you cut back, you switch things around – until it feels entirely natural. A story should feel easy when of course it's far from easy. It's about the *appearance* of ease.

The short story is a sprint, and the novel is a long-haul marathon composed of numerous internal sprints. One is not necessarily *better* than the other, but you're more likely to fail with a novel. Novels are more dangerous. You commit yourself to the idea that you might see two, three or four years disappear down the rabbit hole. With a collection of stories, there will always be a way to pick yourself up and dust yourself off. I like both forms equally, and I don't tend to privilege one over the other.

Your first lines – such as "The first is hidden high in a mahogany bookcase" and "He had agreed in the spring to write a short story for the New Year's Eve edition of a newspaper

magazine" – are suspenseful and propelling. What particular effect are you aiming for in the first line of a story?

Funnily enough, I don't find those to be compelling first lines at all. I was holding back with those lines. I wanted to keep the tempo quiet at first and then draw the reader in. Gogol once said that the true, unwritten last line of every story is: "And nothing was ever the same again." The same could also be said for the first line of any story: "And from that moment on, everything was about to change."

Kevin Barry recently wrote this in the *Atlantic*: "There's too much out there to be dealing with: music, amazing films, good stuff of every variety. So you've got to get them fucking quick. That really changes the way you've got to approach writing as a novelist. It's more like a short story now, in some ways. You have to get the reader on the first page of a short story, you have to convince them of a world inside page one. As writers try to capture the scattered attention of readers, I think the novel is moving towards that degree of compression." Do you agree with his last assertion? What is your response to abbreviated attention spans of readers?

Barry is one of my favorite writers. I really adore his work.



AN EXCERPT FROM “Treaty” in *Thirteen Ways of Looking*
by Colum McCann

SHE IS FALLING, ever so faintly, into age. It is not the slowness of rising in the morning, or the weariness of eyesight, or the chest pains that appear with more and more regularity, but the brittleness of memory that disturbs her now—how the past can glide away so easily, how the present can drift, how they sometimes collide—so that when she sees her torturer on television, she is not sure if her imagination is playing tricks, or if he has simply sifted through the sandbox of memory, slid headlong down the channel of thirty-seven years to tease her into a terrible mistake, or if it is truly him, appearing now on the late Spanish-language news, casual, handsome, controlled.

A crisp blue shirt with an open neck. His teeth white against the dark of his skin. A poised offhandedness to the manner in which he holds himself, at a conference, with

several others, a row of microphones set up in front of them.

His appearance is so sudden at the tail end of the news that she pulls back sharply in her armchair, startling the two other Sisters on the couch.

Beverly holds her hand in the air to reassure them: All right, sorry, only me, go back to sleep.

She leans to turn up the volume on the remote but his image is gone, the report tailing off, a young blonde reporter staring confidently into the camera. A shot from along the river Thames. How is that possible? Perhaps she has garbled the images, confused the reports? The geography alone is too dizzying to contemplate.

The slippages of memory have happened so much recently. Mangled sentences, mislaid keys, forgotten names. Rainshowers of words, then drought. Only last week, she got lost on a walk along the beach in the bay, took the

wrong path out of the dunes, the wind whipping the grass around her feet. Three miles from the house, she had to ask someone to phone a cab. Even then she couldn't remember the exact address.

Too many uncertainties, so that even the absolute certainties—the day of the week, the tie of a shoelace, the rhythm of a prayer—have been called into question. And yet there's something about the man's face—if only for a split second—that sluices a sense of ice along the tunnel of her spine. The one brief close-up. The way he held himself on the screen, amidst a line of dignitaries. What was it exactly? The peculiar poise that age had brought upon him? The access to the microphones? The flagrant manner of his reappearance? The single quick close-up?

Her torturer. Her abuser. Her rapist.

Excerpt from *Thirteen Ways of Looking* reprinted with permission from Colum McCann © 2015, Random House, a division of Penguin Random House.

And while I agree that the novel is moving towards a degree of compression, I think it's important to also say that contemporary readers are more agile now. They make big leaps in time and geography. A lot of this has to do with the Internet. We are in the era of the hyper-novel. But readers are sophisticated. They don't necessarily want a car crash on the first page. There's also an ache for deeply engaged honesty. So I'm not against the notion of the writer whispering in my ear: *Trust me, this may take some time, but it will be worth it in the end.*

You use an interesting, although not unprecedented approach to quotations. Why did you choose hyphens rather than quotation marks for dialogue? Our readers always have to make decisions around such choices, and we'd like to know why you made this one.

A story finds its own proper way of announcing itself. It's a felt thing for me. Sometimes I use quotation marks, sometimes I use hyphens, sometimes I leave it unsaid. It's a way of putting a sort of "accent" on a story. You search for the one that feels right. In *Let the Great World Spin*, for instance, I used every form available.

What are the specific challenges you face in writing novels and short stories? Are the challenges the same?

The specific challenge is to get it done. And to get it done as powerfully and as beautifully as you can. And to split the atom every time you write a sentence. That's all. No big deal. Just split the atom once. And then do it again and again. And then find a good title. And hope that someone gets blown away.

An attack on you in 2014 has clearly had a deep impact on you and activated you in such a way that you have spoken out about violence. Indeed, there's a sense of threat in your story collection. Could you talk about influences on your writing – whether attacks such as the one you experienced, or your children, or your observational powers? Or what else?

Most of my work operates outside of my immediate life, but it has been built on the premise that I want to be able to express all the currents that flow inside me. To have that agility to reach a state of otherness and yet express my own internal truth at the same time. I tend to write about things that are distant from my immediate experience. In the end, though, every line is autobiographical simply because it has come from me. There is no other explanation. I'm not conducting a literary séance: I am putting the words on the page, and I must take full responsibility for what are, in essence, my words. And

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they have been influenced by what is happening to me in my life. That incident in New Haven in particular had an influence on me. But I punched back by telling the story. I won that fight fair and square.

Lots of writers talk about having a story to tell, but fleshing it out is rigorous work. How do you go from an impression or vague sense to a fully developed idea? Is it the writing process, thinking process or is there an approach you take to building a fully realized scene, character, narrative?

The glory is always in the detail. Detail, detail, detail. Find the extreme and telling detail; after that, you will have a story. The more specific the detail, the better.

In some ways, this feels like a contemplative collection – so internal. And yet, it feels deeply detailed. How do you research the nuts and bolts of your stories? What are the resources you use?


One of the reasons I love writing is that I get a chance to be outside of myself. I expand my lungs. I go into new territory. I try to make myself available to new geographies and ideas. I love going into these new places. Often that involves extensive research. I have an enormous affection for that old-fashioned institution, the library.

And for librarians. Our libraries are deeper than Google. And they're warm. They're welcoming. They're not policed. They're not infected by advertisements. So a lot of my research will take place in the library. I especially love the New York Public Library on 42nd Street. That's one of the greatest places in the world. And I have to say that I just like getting out into the world and meeting people, chatting with them. That's enormously important to me.

What are the top three key elements of an effective short story – the kind of tools a new writer might need to be told before embarking on the form?

Do you have the staying power? Do you know what it means to fail? Are you prepared to persevere?

Name three short stories that are either favorites or that you think anyone interested in short stories should study.

I could go on forever. There are all sorts of stories that I think will last forever but let me just give you three off the top of my addled head. James Joyce "The Dead." Nathan Englander "The Tumblers." Janet Peery "What the Thunder Said." All brilliant examples of the form. 

Alicia Anstead is the editor-in-chief of *The Writer* magazine.

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FROM OUR EDITOR

In the short story “Gargoyles and Stars,” we meet Lydia who is searching for the car she parked at her alma mater in New York City. She’s a cheerful woman with a sense of humor and a commitment to purpose. She has many vibrant memories. Indeed, her loyalty to the past is trumped only by the fact that it doesn’t exist in the present except in her imagination. Her lively inner life is central to understanding both plot and character in Caroline Bock’s tale of a woman on an adventure in old age.

Novelist and short story writer Colum McCann chose Bock’s piece as the first-place winner of *The Writer Two Roads Diverge* short story contest. McCann read the top 10 entries, and placed Bock’s at the top of the list for its exploration of memory, regret, madness, sorrow and loss. That’s a lot to pack into a story, but of course that was the challenge: How can you create a universe in 2,000 words?

Bock’s story follows, and we hope you enjoy reading it. Three other stories placed in our contest.

Second prize went to Barbara Stark-Nemon’s “A Wolf with Patience.” Third prize went to Brenda Sinclair Sutton’s “Good for the Soul.” And honorable mention went to John Philipp’s “White Rice.” You can read them all at writermag.com.

You can also read an interview with Colum McCann in these pages. His thoughtful explanations of his craft are truly inspiring. We’re delighted to present an excerpt from his short story “Treaty” in his newest collection *Thirteen Ways of Looking*.

Our short story contests are ongoing because we believe in creating opportunities for writers to find their way to publication and to success. We hope you have fun reading everything published in this issue – especially the treat of fiction. We hope Bock’s tale spurs you to tell your own stories and to watch for more opportunities to get them into print and in front of the eyes of readers.

—Alicia Anstead

Gargoyles and Stars

BY CAROLINE BOCK

1st PLACE

AT THE CORNER where Lydia thought she left her car was a lake of crushed glass. She was sure she had parked the car, directly behind the “no parking from here to corner sign” and “no parking construction sign,” which since there wasn’t any construction that she could see, she assumed it was fine. She was three blocks from the campus and a pair of slender, ephemeral students hurried by her. She remembered this for them:

“The City College of New York, founded as the Free Academy and opened in 1849 began as an educational and political experiment. It was the first public college in New York and it soon became known as ‘The Poor Man’s Harvard.’”

As she stood in the gutter, where she was sure she had parked her car – she had even written the address down since she was prone to misplacing her parked cars these days – and she had this vision of herself in a mini-skirt and boots in front of prospective freshmen and their parents, a half-remembered self. “But I can’t stand here forever, can I?” she said, digging her phone out of the bottom of her purse; it was dead. So no car, no phone. Now if she had a phone she could call one of those Uber cars, even though she had never done that before. Of course, she’d call her husband first.

She could make her way back to the university, her alma mater; there must be a security guard somewhere that could help her. She had driven in for a special evening lecture, and had quite enjoyed it, even though it ran late, and she stayed even later, admiring the Gothic architecture of Shepard Hall. So she wasn’t going to have the night ruined. If only there were still pay phones on corners, she thought, and then, a police car wound its way up the block. She flagged it down. “I think my car was stolen,” she said in an even tone to the stony-eyed officer. She didn’t want to jump to conclusions. She wasn’t going to panic.

“You need to go down to the precinct,” he said. “On 125th Street.” His radio beeped and flashed, and he waited a minute until she repeated “125th Street,” and left her tracing the burning whirl of sirens and lights into the air. She hesitated, studying the Gothic peaks of the university against the sky with its crowds of stars over the campus heights. She recited, not a poem, though she certainly knew some poetry:

“The campus as it now stands was designed by George B. Post in 1898. Post’s Collegiate Gothic design was associated with the medieval images of Oxford and Cambridge. See the many grotesque sculptures decorating the building and notice that they are engaged in activities reflecting academic pursuits. Above, a creature reads a book, another pours a substance into a flask during an experiment.”

She looked up as if expecting a gargoyle to fly past her.

Ahead of her the line of parked cars snaked down the curbs of Convent Avenue. Across the street: a new school of architecture, a white, windowless cube, half underground, wedged outside the campus gates. She couldn’t bear to look at it. No gargoyles guarded that building. “Well, I’m going to have to get myself to that precinct.” However, in addition to there being no phone booths, there were no taxicabs at this time of night in this part of Harlem.

Nevertheless, she was quite capable of walking from 130th to 125th Street, no matter that it was late and the way ahead of her now deserted, canyons of locked doors and shut tight windows. But Harlem was safer now than in her day when

squeegee men would gather around flaming garbage cans, passing a bottle, eyeing girls like her. They’re all gone. And she had on her comfortable shoes, didn’t she? She didn’t wear mini-skirts or high-heeled suede boots anymore – she joked with herself before double-checking. Her shoes were black and thick-soled and she wore dark pants with a stretch waist. The night was chilly but she had forgotten a coat. No use waiting here, she was good to go.



Lydia arrived about twenty minutes later at the police precinct and climbed the short flight of stairs. She sniffed. The air smelled of old colognes and lingering mildew. She wished she could be back on the street. Her legs and hips ached. Her purse had twisted under her armpit. Her hand clutched a scrap of paper.

“You know this address,” she thought. “Of course, you’re a university student. English lit major. Dating a nice guy. Lyddie and Moe, that’s what everyone calls you.”

His full name is Maurice and yours is Lydia. Moe has silky shoulder-length hair and a Fu Manchu mustache, and your mother doesn’t like either, yet she is very proud that you’re the first in the family to go to college. That’s it, isn’t it? Cool. Groovy. Dig it. Right on.” She wanted to pump her fist in the air.

When the officer on duty finally showed up at the front desk, grey and hooked-faced, he gurgled down sips of coffee from one of those quart-size containers of coffee, one filled with cream and extra sugars, a dizzy steam rising from its core. “I’m here because of my car,” said Lydia, pleased at knowing what to say to him even though she was a little muddled. “My car is missing.”

“License and registration.”

Lydia felt compelled to explain further that she had been at a lecture at City College. She wouldn’t want him to think she was in the neighborhood for anything involving drugs. In the past, men and their wet whispers of *smoke, smoke, smoke*, followed her from the subway to the campus. She had smoked a little pot in her day, didn’t she? She sucked in her breath. She was sure she did and that she liked it.

The officer gazed down on her. She would have loved a cup of the sweet coffee, to jolt her memory, but instead she said, “At City College, you should know that Dr. Noah Webster, our first president, a graduate of West Point, said that the school was an experiment. ‘Whether an institution of the highest grade can be successfully controlled by the popular will, not by the privileged few.’”

“License and registration, and we’ll get you out of here.”

Lydia wished there was somewhere to sit, but there were no chairs in sight. She paced, planning on how she’d share this with Moe. He was always protective of her, not that he

had to be. She'd make it a funny story; tell him about the gargoyles and stars.

When the officer finally returned he said, "Your car was towed to the pound. Parking at a construction site."

"But I wasn't, was I?"

Lydia turned to leave. She had been here long enough. "Wait just one minute, you'll need these." He pressed toward her a scroll of tickets printed out from some computer along with her license and registration. "You think you should call and tell somebody to come get you?"

Lydia's back bristled. She wasn't going to worry Moe. "What's the address?"

"Pier 76. West 38th Street and 12th Avenue."

"Open now?"

"Open twenty-four hours."

On 125th Street, she hailed a yellow taxicab.



At the City of New York tow pound, she found herself in a waiting room that could be anywhere – no windows, the stink of cigarettes, even with the

No Smoking sign, every seat filled – but at the same time, nowhere but Manhattan. The clock over the service windows read: eleven o'clock. It would be one o'clock in the morning before it was her turn, before she'd discover that she had no more cash on her, not even have a credit card. One thing the room did have was a bank of pay phones, and one worked. Luckily quarters always speckled the bottom of her purse. She dialed the phone number inside her address book marked smartly: In Case of Emergency.

An interview with Caroline Bock, author of "Gargoyles and Stars"



"I'm always asking myself the question: Why is this night different from all other nights? Meaning, why is this moment important to single out from all others?" says Caroline Bock, whose short story won first place in *TWTwo Roads Diverge* contest. She is the author of two young adult novels, *Lie* and *Before My Eyes*, and her short stories and poetry have appeared in such journals as *Ploughshares* and *Zero Dark-Thirty*. Bock has a MFA in fiction from The City College of New York. Prior to focusing on her writing, she led the marketing and public relations departments at Bravo cable network, IFC and IFC Films. She lives in Maryland with her husband and two children and works as freelance bookseller with the independent bookstore Politics & Prose. We asked her to tell us about the process of writing "Gargoyles and Stars." Her responses follow.

First lines are so important, especially in a short story. How did you develop your first line? What did you want it to accomplish for the reader?

This story was inspired by a prompt to my monthly short fiction group. We were to write a piece of flash fiction where the setting was central. So I started in a different mindset from where I usually start – I usually begin with a character. Instead, I headed off with a memory of a place, and then, a dramatic moment at that setting, somewhat inspired by a true incident.

The ending of the story is ambiguous. What do you hope readers will take away from it?

We've reached the end of the journey with Lydia. She is safe. Right now, the sun is rising; her mind is with her beloved and her place of happy memories. The

future is uncertain, but then it always is, except for the stars returning each night. I wanted the readers to feel that they lived an entire life with Lydia over this one night. A bittersweet, but satisfying ending for a short story, I hope.

What are the origins of this story: something you witnessed? experienced? an idea you wanted to explore? Tell us more about how it began in your imagination and how it grew to a full story.

I attended the City College of New York twice in my life: in the 1980s and more recently from about 2006 to 2011 to pursue a master's degree in fiction. I experienced the much less safe Harlem of the 1980s and the much more gentrified Harlem of today. When I recently returned as a student, I would drive up to

the campus from my Long Island home twice a week. One night, I returned to where I parked my car on Convent Avenue, and it wasn't there. It turned out to be one of the most remarkable nights of my life – and the backbone of the story. However, when I sat down to use this night for the prompt, I asked myself what if? What if it wasn't someone like me who found a lake of glass instead of her car? Who would that person be? Why would she be at City College? What would be different about her experience?

What is your best advice to other short story writers – something that has guided and sustained you as a writer?

Take what you know and turn it around. Ask yourself questions. What if it were this way, or that, or completely different from the

way I remember it? What if it were something new, but at the same time, rooted in memory? What if I wrote something short, when I'm more comfortable writing long? Or write long, when I'm more comfortable with short? Or write in the third person when I so often default to the first? What is the challenge I have with this piece, and how is it different from other challenges I've given myself? I like to write to engage myself as much as I like to engage the reader. I'm someone with a lot of questions.

Comments from Colum McCann

The story is active and sharp. It moves swiftly from its opening line. It concerns the myriad ways of memory and regret. It also confronts the madness and sorrow of loss. As for craft, it is well put together and the writer has style. One thing I would suggest to the writer that she try to inhabit the thoughts of the character by avoiding phrases like "she remembered" or "she thought" in order to truly inhabit the pulse of the moment. But it's a brave story with many different strands nicely helixed together.



Someone ashen and unshaven in sweatpants approached her spot among the pay phones – he wasn't Moe, who liked bell-bottomed jeans and wide-collared shirts and for all that beautiful hair had a neat appearance.

"Ma!" he said. "Come on."

She covered up her surprise with, "This is how you catch a cold," pointing to his bare feet in sneakers.

"You're killing me, Ma. It's three o'clock in the morning, and I get a call that you're at the pound."

Of course, this was her son. Gabriel. "Where's your father?"

"Give me the tickets." He went up to window number three and paid the fines, two-hundred-and-fifty dollars, and then he was shuffling out ahead of her, out the doors, through the maze of towed cars slick with the dank dew of the Hudson River. "Is Moe okay?" she called after him. "Why isn't he here?"

"Because he's dead," Gabriel said, turning left and right, confused amid the rows of cars down in the wait of dawn.

She wanted to make a joke, to say, "That's the reason?" but she could see that he was haggard and fretful.

"We have to talk about what's next, Ma."

"We're going home."

"I don't live with you anymore, Ma. I'm a fifty-year-old guy."

"Then I'm glad you don't live with me."

"I'm going to drive you back to your house."

"How will you get home?"

"Don't worry about me."

"I'm your Mother, aren't I?"

He slammed his fist onto the roof of a car. She hoped it wasn't hers. Tears cracked from his eyes. "There must be a thousand fucking cars here!"

"I'm sorry I called you. I'll find my own car."

He hitched up his sweatpants, and huffed around her, sinking in behind the wheel of a vehicle three down from where they had been standing.

"I'll drive," she said, tapping the window.

"Are you kidding me? Get in."

She wanted to say, "Yes, Moe," but remembered that this man wasn't Moe. She climbed into the passenger seat anyway; it felt good to sit.

"For once you're going to listen to me. You got to stop driving back to that campus up in Harlem. It isn't safe."

"Nothing but good things ever happened to me there," she said quietly.

He clutched the dashboard. "I know. You met Dad there. You were campus guides."

"I was pretty good at it too. Better than Moe. More outgoing. Don't get me wrong, Moe is brilliant, a physics major, but I always say to him don't hide your face in a crowd of stars. I'll always love you." Her thoughts trailed off before shooting back. "When did he die? When did Moe die?"

"A long time ago. I was a kid. He was murdered, buying heroin."


"On campus?"

"No, in Yonkers, not far from the house." He sighed. "You always told me he went straight to heaven."

"Did you know that ten graduates of the City University of New York went on to win Nobel Prizes? They were the children of the working class and often the first of their families to go to College, like many of the students here today."

"You remember all of that, don't you?"

He jammed the key into the ignition. "We're getting out of here," he said, but didn't start the engine.

The sun edged up over the rows of towed cars, over the pilings of the old pier and out toward the Hudson River and the state of New Jersey. The stars faded, they always do, at the same time, she knew they were always there. The Gothic spires and the gargoyles and the entire campus rose over Harlem and in her sights, a place of hope and possibility – and with all respect to home or heaven, she was fine waiting here. 

Download the digital edition to read Colum McCann's comments and about the contest winners.



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PRICE of PROMOTION

BY AMIRA MORGAN DICKI



LIKE MANY DEBUT AUTHORS, I spent the months leading up to my book's release date dancing around with excitement, nerves and energy to burn. I knew my publisher was doing lots of work to get the book out there, and I was eager to step up and do my part to help. But what would increase my chances even more for success?

As a former executive editor with more than 13 years of experience at three major publishing houses, I was all too aware that there is no magic formula for making a book a success. If there were, authors and publishers would follow it every time, and all books would sell to expectations. An author

and his or her publisher can pour huge amounts of time, money and talent into a book's marketing and publicity campaign and see little or no effect on sales – and sometimes a book with almost no promotion takes off via an alchemy of its own. I knew the energy and cash I'd be investing to help promote my novel would be only a drop in the bucket, and that it takes a lot of drops to make a bucket overflow – more drops than my budget of "as cheaply as possible" was likely to produce. Yet I still wanted to do *something* – preferably without going crazy or broke.

Instead of thinking of my promotional efforts as the key that might potentially make or break my book (a sure path to insanity), I tried to think of the promotion as part of the celebration and choose expenses that would be worth it to me in other ways – to focus on tasks that I thought would be fun. And because I had more time to spend than money to burn, I took a DIY approach.

My first book was coming out. Hooray! Here's what I did to celebrate, and what it cost.



Created an author website and established a social media presence

Since I lack html skills, I used Squarespace to build my website, using a 10-percent off promotion code I found through one of the podcasts the company sponsors. I was already on Facebook and Twitter, and joining Goodreads and Google+ took minimal effort. Among these, Google+ seemed to offer minimal return. Twitter, on the other hand, was chock-full of book people. I used FeedBurner to send my occasional blog posts to my Goodreads and Amazon author pages and allow fans (read: my mom) to subscribe to them by email. Should I have joined Tumblr, Pinterest and Instagram as well? Perhaps. But I wanted to leave myself some time to write.

Dollar cost: \$182 for the first two years of the website

Time cost: About 5 hours for the initial website setup, plus 2-3 hours per month for content updates and obsessive monitoring of visitor statistics. I don't want to think about how many hours I spend on social media, but since I'd have been scrolling through Twitter and Facebook anyway, even without a book coming out, I'm telling myself those hours don't count. Please don't puncture the illusion.



Coordinated an online cover reveal with a popular kid lit blogger

My author website was up and running, but it wasn't getting much traffic. When my editor sent me the final cover for the book (and I nearly passed out from happiness because suddenly the book was real), I reached out to a blogger whose site I like and asked if she would host a cover reveal.

Cover reveal day feels like a birthday without the stress. I highly recommend doing one, just for the celebration of it.

Dollar cost: None

Time cost: 30 minutes coordinating the cover reveal, plus a few hours on social media the day it went live.



Gave my advance copies away

My editor sent me 12 copies of the book's bound galley, also known as advance reader copies. After hugging each one and taking several photos, I was tempted to share the ARCs with my family and friends, but instead I kept one for myself, gave one to my parents and used the other 10 strategically. I sent nine with handwritten notes to booksellers, authors, librarians and bloggers (most of whom I knew only through Twitter) who I hoped might like and champion the

book. I used the last one for a Goodreads giveaway, which is an easy and cheap way to bring a book to the attention of a whole lot of people who like to read. That giveaway went so well (about 1,000 people entered, and several hundred added it to their TBR lists) that I asked my publisher to help do another giveaway leading up to the book's on-sale date. I posted that giveaway for five signed hardcovers, and my publicist provided and mailed the books.

Dollar cost: \$14 in postage

Time cost: 45 minutes signing and mailing the bound galleys; 16 minutes posting the two giveaways.



Designed and printed shelf talkers to share with independent bookstores

I am a local bookstore nut – the kind of tourist who seeks them out in every place I visit – and one of my dreams as an author is to have my book sold in lots of independent bookstores. While browsing in one of my favorite Brooklyn indies, I thought of a way to help spark booksellers' interest.

Several months before publication, my editor had shared the book with two best-selling authors who kindly wrote praise quotes, also known as "blurbs." My publisher printed the blurbs on the book jacket, shared them with retailers and posted them online. I asked if I could use them to make shelf talkers – signs that call attention to a book – for my publisher to send to independent bookstores. My editor liked the idea and the marketing team agreed. They helped me write a letter introducing myself and the book to the 200 booksellers who would be receiving the mailing.

When my publisher said yes to the shelf talkers, I cheered and then panicked. I didn't actually know how to make shelf talkers or have any idea how much printing them might cost. After an hour of Internet research, my heart rate slowed and my breathing returned to normal. Although it's possible to spend hundreds of dollars on fancy laminated signs in custom shapes, I found I could get standard sizes with a non-glossy finish for cheap. I recruited a friend with some Photoshop skills, peered over his shoulder giving directions for an evening and sent in my order. They turned out great.

Dollar cost: \$97

Time cost: 5.5 hours



Visited my publishing house to give thank-you cookies to the team

Most authors get to have contact with their editor and publicist and the editor's assistant, but behind every book is a whole team of people – from designers and production

editors to marketing managers, sales reps, subsidiary rights managers and more – who nurture, feed and support the book throughout the publishing process. I'm genuinely grateful for all those people, and it never hurts to be the author who brings sugar and says thank you. When I visited my publishing house for a meeting with my editor, I brought 50 packages of ginger-molasses cookies, tied with ribbons and thank-you notes.

Dollar cost: \$14 for cookie ingredients and packaging

Time cost: About 9 hours – for baking the cookies and packing them beautifully. Note: If I had realized how time-consuming dog bone-shaped thank-you notes would be to create, cut out, color in and tie up, I might have designed the packaging a bit differently – and two hours to deliver.



Created a book trailer

Book trailers get a bad rap for being time-consuming, expensive and unlikely to have much impact on sales, but I wanted to create one anyway. I thought it would be a fun way to show off the book's interior illustrations and give me something of substance to post on social media.

I scoured YouTube for kid lit book trailers to get a sense of how others approached them. The best-looking ones I found were all partially or fully animated, which I knew I could not do myself. I decided to start in on the parts I *could* do and worry about the rest later.

I borrowed some recording equipment, wrote a script for the voiceover and coaxed my 8-year-old niece into repeating the words into the mic. After selecting which images from the book to use, I requested the files from my editor and did a rough mockup of how it might look if I plopped the art as-is into iMovie. (Answer: very, very bad.) A friend gave me a tutorial in sound editing using the free software Audacity, and I painstakingly pieced together the voiceover. (This part took forever, but I love that it uses my niece's voice.) I added music I composed and plucked on my violin. In the meantime, I looked into hiring someone to "pretty up" the visuals, but the friend-of-a-friend I reached out to was on deadline, and by the time he'd sent recommendations of who else to hire, I'd spent enough time learning how to do it myself that it seemed like I might as well finish the task. Ten more hours of hack-job movie-making later, I finally had a trailer I felt happy with.

I sent it to my editor and publicist, and the publicist reached out to an influential children's librarian and arranged for him to host the premiere on his blog. This resulted in substantially more views and tweets (especially within the teacher and librarian community) than I could have generated on my own, and made all the time spent feel worth it – once I finally caught up on lost sleep.

Dollar cost: None

Time cost: 34 hours. Now that I have all these skills, I could probably make a new video in a third of the time, which was how long I'd originally thought it would take.



Designed and printed bookmarks

I was skeptical about the value of printing custom bookmarks for events, until an author friend pointed out that it's nice to have something to sign for the kids who can't afford to buy a book. Since my book is the first in a series, the bookmark is also a good way to showcase the covers of the other books. I called in another favor from my Photoshop-proficient friend and placed an order for 2,000, which seemed like too many but they're cheaper in bulk. Now I have enough bookmarks to give three to every human I encounter. Too bad I forgot to put my website on them. Whoops.

Dollar cost: \$187

Time cost: 1.5 hours



Sent myself on an East Coast book tour

It doesn't make a whole lot of economic sense to send oneself on a book tour, but it made a ton of sense, fun-wise, to take this party on the road.

For the first stop on my tour, I took a road trip with my mother to a small-town literary festival, where I made my first author appearance in front of an audience of my mother, my godmother and exactly three children. I sold 10 copies of the book and considered it a great success. I've heard of author signings where no one shows up, and this was a low-pressure way to try out my presentation. Plus those kids were terrific, as is my mom, and the festival paid for my lodging.

The next weekend, I flew from New York to Atlanta, where my best friend lives. She had a book coming out that week, so we did a school visit together and had a joint release party at an independent bookstore we love. The next day I flew to D.C. to visit my brother and his family, did an event at their local bookstore and gave two presentations at my nieces' elementary school, which I think made all three of us feel famous. Then it was home to Brooklyn for another bookstore event, to an audience full of my friends (the best). I brought drinks, snacks and games to each signing, which made the tour more expensive, but the parties more fun.

Dollar cost: \$413 for planes, trains and automobiles; \$8 for crayons; \$29 for a computer display port to VGA adapter; and \$136 for wine and other refreshments.

Time cost: 7.5 days traveling and events, 5 hours coordinating logistics, 8 hours preparing my presentation and slideshow and 2 hours baking cookies and shopping for cheese and prosecco.



Did a few blog interviews (but not too many)

Many authors do extensive blog tours to celebrate their books' release dates, but that can get very time-consuming for someone who writes as slowly as I do. I decided to mostly focus my energy elsewhere. The three interviews I did do were fun, and helped me think through the ways I wanted to talk about my book and myself when fielding questions from kids at events.

Dollar cost: None

Time cost: 10.5 hours (about 3.5 hours per interview)



Staged a funny photo to post on release day

It's trendy in the Twittersphere to call a book's release date its "birthday" – and the amount of time, pain, hope and love poured into a book's creation can feel akin to pregnancy and labor – so I thought it would be funny and apt to stage a photo of myself in a maternity ward, cradling my book baby, to share on the day of its "birth." My father works in a hospital, and the night nurses there were wonderful about helping this silly dream come true. They

dressed me up in a hospital gown and bracelet, gave me a blanket for swaddling my newborn, and encouraged me to look both joyful and exhausted as I gazed from the book to the camera. I don't know if tweeting or posting my book's birth photo sold copies, but it made me laugh, amused my friends and got some attention on social media.

Dollar cost: None

Time cost: 3 hours



Wrote some essays to pitch

Not all my essays are related to my book (and not all have been published), but when the title appears in my bio, it helps get the word out. Plus, I like writing essays, and for some of them I get paid. Most important, these shorter projects help distract me from drafter's malaise when I'm stuck in the murky middle of writing the next book.

Dollar cost: None (\$1,000 gained, not including taxes)

Time cost: About 120 hours (10-50 hours per essay)

Total cost, in dollars: \$1,080

Total cost, in time: Immeasurable. 

Anica Mrose Rissi is the author of *Anna, Banana, and the Friendship Split*. Her personal essays have been published by NYTimes.com.

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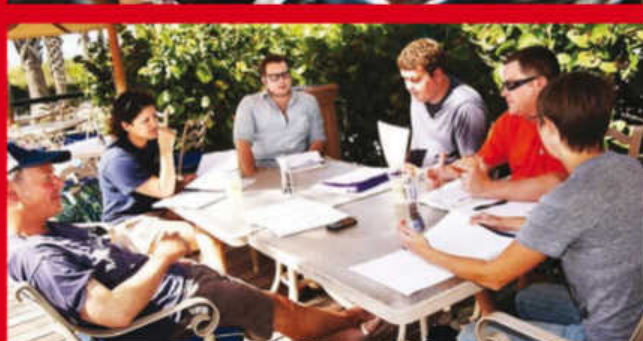
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Obsessed by STORY

MEGAN MAYHEW BERGMAN MOVED FROM SHORT FORM FICTION TO NONFICTION TO A NOVEL. SHE SAYS SHE'S NOT A THRILL SEEKER. BUT HER WORK MAY PROVE HER WRONG.

Story by Megan Kaplon
Photos by Jake Belcher

MEGAN MAYHEW BERGMAN's short stories feature strong, intrepid, daring women. She writes about them, she says, because they are her opposite.

"It's obsessing over what I admire, more than what I actually possess," she says.

By her own admission, Bergman has a lot of fear. She is sensitive. She likes things to be just right.

But this self-assessment doesn't do the native North Carolinian justice. Bergman published her first story collection *Birds of a Lesser Paradise* in the midst of completing graduate school, moving from North Carolina to Vermont, mourning the loss of her mother-in-law and taking care of her colicky newborn daughter.

"In a way, it pulled me through," she says of publishing her first collection during that trying time, "and I was so down that I gave myself permission not to care about criticism anymore. So in some ways, breaking down a little bit can be very fortuitous because you get to rebuild."

Three years after the publication of that collection, Bergman went to Kenya with The Boma Project, an organization that helps impoverished women in Africa start small



businesses and obtain access to education and healthcare.

Bergman's social media posts from her journey offer a glimpse into a woman who is as brave and adventurous as those she writes about.

On Twitter: "I just sat across from a Kenyan warrior in Marsabit who told me about drinking cow's blood and milk & being chased by a rhino!!"

On Tumblr, with a photo of a small hut: "My hut last night in Korr, Northern Kenya. I arm wrestled a former Maasai warrior & lost gracefully."

The woman who wrote those posts is, if not fearless, certainly making a conscious effort to face her fears and expand her horizons.

"I grew up in a pretty conservative, safe household," she says, "and I think for a long time I was afraid of getting my hands dirty in other people's problems. I just don't want to be that person anymore. I want to be involved."

The fascination – "obsession," as she says – with the environment and the lives of women that drives her to take action, also seeps through in her writing, including her most 2015 short story collection *Almost Famous Women* and the nonfiction essays she writes for *Ploughshares*, *Salon.com* and other publications.

"[These topics] are things that get me up in the morning," Bergman explains. "They're the fights I pick with the world."

Her newest book, *Almost Famous Women*, explores the lives of 13 real women, each of whom had a brief moment of fame in her lifetime, but in

the decades or centuries since has all but completely faded from the public consciousness. Bergman discovered these women in various biographies and books, and she became consumed with finding out everything she could about them. Bergman took 10 years to shape *Almost Famous Women* and then began writing the stories, hitting pause on the novel she had a contract to write.

"The short story form comes to me very naturally because I'm a Southerner," Bergman says, "and even though I'm a very secular person now, I spent my childhood in church. The shape of a sermon is so similar to a short story, with the rise and the fall and the morality tale and the focus on language and cadence."

The Southern literary tradition, Bergman says, is rooted in short fiction. With some distance from her childhood and young adult years in the South, Bergman loves to explore the difference between regions of the country, and is fascinated by place and setting in her writing.

"I'm really interested in [the question of] can you really write regional fiction anymore?" she says. "I think you can, but you can't do it in the way that you used to. If you write a Southern story that's all biscuits and 'y'all,' then it's a false note."

When writing *Almost Famous Women*, Bergman worked hard to avoid hitting false notes because her characters' real lives had to be contended with. She wanted to get their stories right and be true to who they were, while still giving herself the creative space to fictionalize parts of their stories.

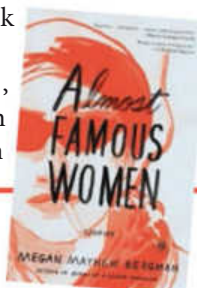
"Since so many of these women are missing parts of their stories in contemporary knowledge – we have a few letters, there are footnotes in other people's biographies, there are a few scant newspaper articles – you already have to engage your imagination to imagine their lives anyway," she says. "That helped move me along, but that felt like the greatest risk. I have a really lengthy author's note at the end to make it right, make it OK, but it felt a little dangerous."

The book itself also represents a somewhat perilous choice.

"One of my bigger philosophical thoughts about the collection as a whole was I didn't want to write 'Almost Famous White Women' or 'Almost Famous Straight Women.' I wanted it to be a diverse collection," Bergman explains.

But she says, when writing short fiction, you have more room to challenge the status quo because short story collections don't operate in the same sort of mainstream commercial realm as other genres.

"Readers seem to be fine with it,"



AN EXCERPT FROM *ALMOST FAMOUS WOMEN*

"Hell-Diving Women"

The bus driver quit last night, and Ruby is behind the wheel of Big Bertha again, going fifty down I-95 in the dark, the bus jostling and rattling over hot tar. It's late August, and even with the windows down the sweet, muggy air hangs over the women, heating the tops of their instrument cases, warming the expired cold cuts. Tiny asks Ruby to keep in a bag behind the driver's seat so she can make sandwiches and sell them to the other girls for a profit. *I gotta hustle, baby*, she says, sending Ruby out to buy the meat at the nearest grocery store while the girls practice.

The band lives on the road, gig to gig. They stay up late, practice in the gymnasiums at colored schools, do each other's hair and makeup, call home if there's a home to call. The days are starting to run together, Ruby thinks. The nights at the clubs too.

How long can it go on? Ruby wonders. Sure, they'll be an end. There always is – I just can't see it. Why work so hard? We sure as hell ain't getting rich. We're getting tired.

Ruby blots her face with a handkerchief. She's thinking about Tiny as she drives, watching the cotton undulate as the big bus passes field after field. Last night Tiny started a set with her signature line: "I make my living blowing! Horns that is." Ruby was having a drink – she was rarely onstage, though she wanted to be – and heard the bartender mutter something about "that fat dyke on the trumpet." It hadn't set well with her. She'd gritted her teeth, started sweating, angry as hell. But she couldn't think of the right thing to say. No, she thinks. I *knew* the right thing to say but I didn't say it. Scared as a cat at the dog pound lately.

He don't know, Ruby thinks, shaking her head. Tiny's a prophet. A genius with no education. A lover and a fighter. A performer, through and through. Shit, man, Count Basie and the Duke want her onstage. She's a star! She can hit a high C!

Excerpt from *Almost Famous Women* reprinted with permission from Megan Mayhew Bergman © 2015, Scribner, a Division of Simon & Schuster.

she continues. “What used to seem scandalous a couple years ago hardly seems scandalous now.”

Though the women who inspired the collection all are real, Bergman didn’t get a free pass when it came to character creation. In fact, she invented most of her main characters and story narrators, saying she thought the collection would read in all-caps if she told every story in first-person from the almost famous woman’s perspective.

“When I think about developing characters, I think a lot about their interior bullshit and how it manifests,” she says. “I’m interested in them as psychological beings. I believe in what James Wood says in his book *How Fiction Works* about how you have to see a character brush up against the world.”

Bergman is still on contract to write the ditched novel. Now two years past deadline, the book remains a work in progress.

“I’m giving myself a lot of permission to fail with my early drafts because a novel is an entirely different form than a piece of short fiction,” she explains. “It’s a different level of intrigue and pacing to sustain. And I don’t want to just put out an adequate book, I want to put out a really strong book, especially now that I know what it’s like to have to stand behind it.”

Writing the novel has been a whole new battle for Bergman. She has to resist the desire to read the entire piece from the beginning every time she sits down to write, as she would normally do with her short fiction. And because she lives a somewhat hectic life – mother of two; wrangler of a small menagerie of dogs, cats and other livestock; manager of a small farm; full-time associate director of the masters of fine arts program at Bennington College – she doesn’t consider herself a full-time writer. Instead, while she farms, takes care of her children, goes for a run, she’s always mulling things over, writing in her head.

“If I let ideas sit for a while, the quality bar is always better,” she says. “I’m an obsessive ruminator.”

Obsession, obsessed, obsessive. Bergman uses these words frequently to describe her writing style and process.

One thing she obsesses about is finding clarity in her work.

“Clarity is something that I absolutely idealize,” she says. “I think a lot about the success of pop songs and their secret brilliance. There’s been something really essential and universal distilled down to the one little kernel of truth and stated plainly and repetitively. I admire clarity more than I admire fluff and flourish.”

That goes for her nonfiction writing, too, most of which also centers on her captivation with the environment and the lives of women. A very versatile writer, readers are likely to find themselves just as enraptured by Bergman’s essay about her complicated relationship with cosmetic products as they were with the story “The Siege at Whale Cay” in *Almost Famous Women* about Joe Carstairs, a wealthy lesbian heiress deemed the “fastest woman on water” because of her talent for motor-boat racing.

Bergman recalls a teacher telling her that if a writer understands the basic principles of narrative and description, the

“THE SHAPE OF
A SERMON IS SO
SIMILAR TO A SHORT STORY, WITH THE
RISE AND THE FALL AND THE MORALITY
TALE AND THE FOCUS ON
LANGUAGE AND CADENCE.”

writer can move easily between fiction and nonfiction. She took this as permission to explore both genres.

“Ultimately, you have to be a good storyteller,” Bergman says. “You have to be considerate of your reader, trust your reader, and have a reason for not wasting the reader’s time, no matter what genre it’s in.”

Recently, however, Bergman has scaled back her online essay writing and social media posting (with the exception of her dispatches from Africa, of course). With all the noise and content floating around online, she wants to be sure she’s adding to the conversation in a meaningful way whenever she posts something.


“What inspires me a lot are people who are willing to get their content by living,” she says, “by getting their hands dirty in the world. I think there is a lot lost if you’re just living in the Internet day in and day out.”

And even though it requires a gut-check every now and then, Bergman has managed (mostly) to rid herself of writer’s envy.

“There are always sales figures or awards or lists you’re not on,” she says. “I have a friend who is a sort of female shaman from the backwoods of Vermont who told me, ‘Megan, let envy just tell you that it’s something you want. Don’t let it demotivate you or make you feel bad about yourself. It’s just another way of saying this is something you might want.’”

What does Bergman want now?

“I have two girls and I just want to be inspiring to them,” she says. “I want to be the woman they think I am, like that expression about dogs. I covet my girls’ opinions more than I covet my dogs, but I do have five dogs, so they count, too.”

And maybe she’ll never drive an ambulance in a war zone or play trumpet in the first integrated women’s band in the U.S. like her beloved almost famous women, but a writer who brings to life ambitious, beautiful prose about issues that matter to her and allows herself to fail and to experience and travel – that’s pretty inspiring, too. 

Megan Kaplon is a contributing editor to *The Writer*.

Clear the calendar

Booking software can tame the scheduling beast.

That time you and a source or an editor exchanged 15 emails before finding a time that works for both of you? So 2015.

Last year, after several lengthy email exchanges, I began experimenting with a new system. Rather than comparing schedules over email, I now send contacts a link via the free version of Youcanbook.me, which is synced with my Google calendar. Contacts can look at my schedule and book a time that works for them. This simple tweak to my process has freed up time I would normally spend emailing, which means more time to write.

Katherine Reynolds Lewis is an independent journalist in the Washington, D.C., area. She covers parenting, education and careers and has seen similar results with online booking software. “It cuts out a lot of

annoying back and forth emails,” she says. “You offer three time slots and by the time someone gets back to you, you’ve already booked one of them.”

Tania Casselle, a New Mexico-based freelance writer, editor and coach who uses TimeTrade.com, says the software has ensured that she has the three crucial pieces of information she needs for an interview or coaching session: date, time and preferred mode of contact (usually a Skype username or phone number).

Before, Casselle says, contacts would “give the day but wouldn’t give the phone number, and everyone’s irritated and off on the wrong foot before you even talk.” Now her sources and coaching students must enter all three components before they can book, and they get a reminder email with the details. “I have

noticed that fewer people flake on the calls,” she says. “It’s easier for people when they’ve done official booking.”

A slew of both free and paid online tools offers similar scheduling capabilities. Here’s how to find the right one and make this strategy work for you.

Test it on a friend first.

Many scheduling tools offer a free 30-day trial or limited free features, so you can experiment without committing. Before you unleash a new tool on editors or sources, Casselle suggests that you “try it out with your friends first when you’re arranging to meet for coffee.” In most programs, you can

customize the booking page and confirmation or reminder emails to suit your needs. Ask your friends for feedback about whether the booking and confirmation process created any confusion.

Keep your calendar updated.

One of freelancing’s great perks is that you don’t have a boss watching your every move. You can take a long lunch or go for an afternoon swim if you don’t have impending deadlines. But if you don’t keep your calendar updated, someone might schedule a phone interview during time you’d planned to spend away from your desk. Lewis works longer days on Mondays and Tuesdays, so she adjusted the settings on her calendar to reflect those work hours. “I have to make sure to block out times I’m going to the gym,” she says.

Helpful time-tracking tools

[Appointment.com](#)
[AppointmentQuest.com](#)
[Calendly.com](#)
[MeetingWizard.com](#)
[ScheduleOnce.com](#)
[TimeCenter.com](#)
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[Youcanbook.me](#)




Present it as a convenience.

I was initially concerned that others might see an automated tool as impersonal. But many sources and publicists get frustrated by lengthy email chains, so I couch it as a benefit to them with a note: "Thanks for agreeing to an interview. You can choose your preferred day and time here." Many have commented on how much easier it is to see my availability in real time and sync with their calendars rather than emailing days and times.

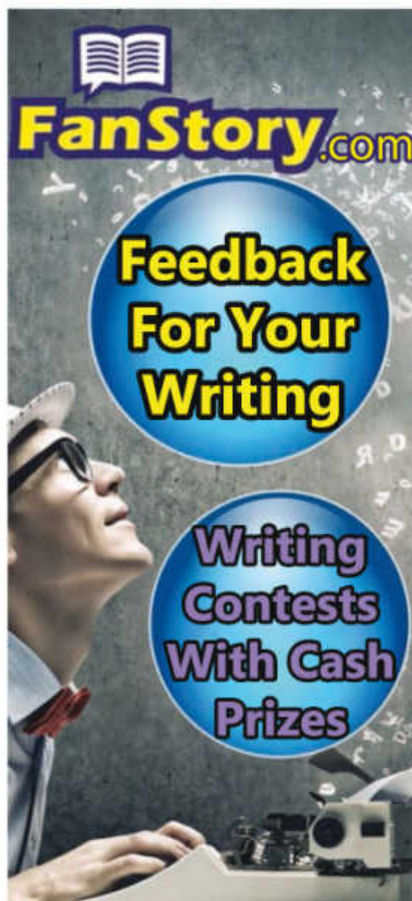
Target individuals.

In one case, Lewis contacted a national member organization and asked to speak with a few state offices to get local examples. The media relations person forwarded her booking link to all 52 offices, and Lewis was flooded with more interviews than she could possibly use, creating frustration on both sides. As a result, she finds that the software system works best when booking an interview with a specific individual. She starts with an email requesting an interview and then sends the link once they've agreed.

Give clear instructions.

Most online scheduling tools are designed to be simple and intuitive, but some people may need more explicit instructions. "Make sure in whatever communication you have that it says clearly anything they need to know," Casselle says, including deadlines. Sometimes, people don't realize that the booking tool automatically detects their local time zone and adjusts accordingly. Because of that, Casselle will include a gentle reminder so those she's meeting with won't have to make adjustments or ask about time zones. 

Susan Johnston is a freelance writer specializing in personal finance, business and lifestyle topics.



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Rising tide

A crash course sparks networking and collaboration.

You've written a book. You've self-published it. Boxes of the final product have arrived and the ebook is for sale. Now what?

"That's just the beginning of the process," says Angela Bole, executive director of the Independent Book Publishers Association, hosts of the annual Publishing University aimed at educating indie writers about the entire publishing process.

The IBPA is the professional trade association for indie publishers and self-published authors, and its conference is not one where you sit around and talk craft. In its 28th year, more than 300 book publishing professionals, including small and indie presses, writers, editors, distributors such as Baker & Taylor and reps from companies such as Amazon and Ingram, gather to discuss making books, sales, copyright, distribution and more. Think of it as a two-day cram session on the business of publishing.

That crash course format contributes to approximately 30 percent repeat attendees and 70 percent new ones. "For indie publishers, it's not like in the Big 5, where you've got business budgets that send you to conference," says Bole. "A lot of these people are paying to come on their own, so they use a lot of discretion. That means everyone there is super engaged and trying to pull as much out of it as they can."



CONFERENCE
IPBA Publishing University

DATES
April 8-9

LOCATION
Salt Lake City, Utah

WEBSITE
publishinguniversity.org

Topics of the more than 30 breakout sessions at this year's PubU include building multiple revenue streams, outside-the-box marketing, leveraging CreateSpace, branding, blogging, contracts, book covers and turning a book into regular speaking gigs. The keynote is Kwame Alexander, who, Bole notes, has a diverse publishing portfolio. She adds, "His father had an indie publishing company. And he was reading *The Independent*, our industry magazine, in his father's garage when he was a teenager. So he's got this long history with indie publishing."

Regarding the spectrum of sessions offered, Bole says, "Our membership is very diverse, and indie publishing is very diverse, and people are very different as well in terms of what their skill sets are. Everyone is coming from a different place in their business and in their person, too.

So we try to bring as much as we can across the whole landscape so that wherever you're at, you can come and we'll meet you there."

Since it is a product of the IBPA, there is a big focus on publishing professionalism and ethics, as well as properly publishing into the supply chain. "A lot of times people come into the business [and] they don't really know how it's structured and set up," says Bole. "Sometimes that means you

can make errors in judgment in terms of deals that you make. Just getting steeped in publishing as a business as opposed to your writer life is an important thing to do."

PubU's sessions aim to be as experiential as possible, focusing on both attendees' work and

bringing that work to the next level. "Every year, we get people that come through for the first time," Bole says. "It's the first time they're really starting to think about metadata and they're really starting to think about a publication plan, and what kind of marketing they're going to do six months prior to publication, and what kind of marketing they're going to do six months post-publication."

But on the whole, Bole says that the conference attracts a savvy clientele who form an open and friendly community that is excited about collaboration.

Part of that collaboration comes in the form of "office hours," blocks of time outside of sessions that faculty members

commit to spending with attendees one on one. Schedules are posted before the conference, allowing participants to sign up in advance and helping to avoid the post-panel crush of people flocking to chat with the presenters. Bole says, “We wanted to make sure there was breath in the conference where, if you saw somebody you really liked and wanted to set up time with them, you could do that in a way that wasn’t rushed and felt really comfortable.”

As far as the topics covered with the expert, that’s up to you. Bole explains, “The expert doesn’t come with an agenda. They’re not sitting there for 20 minutes to teach you anything in particular. We coach them to say, ‘What can I do for you? How can I help?’ And you have to have a specific reason to have sat there and used their time. It’s good to plan ahead and know what you want to get out of the conversation.” And best of all, the sessions are free.

Other interactive highlights of PubU include a live-editing session, a workshop to perfect an elevator pitch and Lights, Camera, YOU. In the latter, which does require an extra fee, attendees sit with a professional videographer, who interviews them and puts together a 3- to 4-minute marketing package that participants can put on their website, post to social media or upload to YouTube. Bole notes, “We’re trying to do stuff that will help the person walk away with their work having been part of the program, as well as having heard and seen a lot of best practice work from other people.”

But the shining moment of PubU doesn’t take place in a breakout session. Last year, the Ben Franklin Awards ceremony returned to the conference, giving prizes in 55 categories and showcasing more than 1,400 independent books. “[It’s] really about them, about honor and honoring them,” says Bole of the winning publishers.

“It’s a beautiful thing about indie publishing and self-publishing,” Bole says.

“Everyone understands that the rising tide lifts all ships. And if you’re in it and you’re working and you’re helpful, then that other person is going to be helpful to you and working for you at some time in this long career that we have.” ■

Meredith Quinn is a graduate of New York University and managing editor at *The Writer*.

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Smoke break

Guest editors choose flash fiction for online mag.

Flash fiction. It's a narrative told in 1,000 words or less. Chinese writers refer to it as a "smoke-long" story; reading a piece of flash takes approximately as much time as smoking a cigarette.

The online magazine *SmokeLong Quarterly*, now in its 13th year, takes its name from this concept. Visit the website, and you'll find concise meditations on marriage and divorce, old age and the longing to have children, and Ouija boards, spirits and dystopic communities.

"One of the things we love as a staff," says editor Tara Laskowski, "is the variety of different kinds of flash fiction that are out there. People submit things that surprise us. We've published great crime stories and fantasy, work that crosses the line and hovers between literary and genre."

Tone, editorial content

Editors publish stories weekly, and then as a collection four times a year. To ensure diversity, *SmokeLong* invites a weekly guest editor to read all the stories submitted in the last seven days. "They choose one story to publish," Laskowski

says. "It brings a variety of tastes and interests to the magazine."

In late November of last year, guest reader Tara Masih chose Karen Sherk Chio's "He Called Me Honeybunch" as the week's featured story. It's a lyrical first-person description of a couple in love and grappling with miscarriage, depression and exhaustion. "The writer distills many months into a few short paragraphs," Masih explains. "Each heavy, meaningful sentence pounds away at the reader like a primitive chant, leading us to a final, mournful note that resonates."

Laskowski and her staff read numerous submissions relating to children lost in pregnancy and childbirth, but she won't declare the topic off-limits. "I don't have any deal-breakers, because people always surprise me," she says. "We receive stories we've

seen a lot, but they're done in such a different and unique way that we can't help but love them."

One of these is Kathryn Lipari's "Twelve Things I Can Tell You about Cutting." While *SmokeLong* staff field plenty of stories on cutting – that is, making scratches on one's body with a sharp object, deep enough to break skin and cause bleeding – they'd never seen anything like Lipari's treatment of the subject.

"It's so specific in its detail and heartbreaking and raw. It's told in a numbered list, but it's the narrative of this woman and all of her issues and emotions – it's very lovely," Laskowski says.

"Dedicated to bringing the best flash fiction to the web on a quarterly basis, whether written by widely published authors or those new to the craft."

Quarterly, online

Genre: Flash fiction

Reading period: Year-round

Length: Up to 1,000 words

Submission format: Digital submission on website

Contact: Tara Laskowski, editor, editors@smokelong.com
smokelong.com

Contributors

SmokeLong publishes first-time authors alongside established writers; you'll find 13-year-old flash storytellers from Hong Kong sharing space with seasoned authors.



Laskowski and her staff promote each piece online with equal fervor, putting links and author interviews up on Twitter and Facebook to build readership and inspire conversation.

The magazine also offers the Kathy Fish Fellowship, whose recipient receives \$500 and the opportunity to workshop the writing with *SmokeLong* staff for 12 months. In addition, the magazine publishes four of the winner's stories – one in each quarterly issue over that year.

Laskowski herself won the 2009 fellowship before she became *SmokeLong*'s editor. "I'd been writing, but not having much success," she explains. "I wasn't having fun, and I submitted to them, and that whole year of focus on flash fiction really shaped me as a writer and made writing fun again. I met so many other editors and writers. It opened a lot of doors."

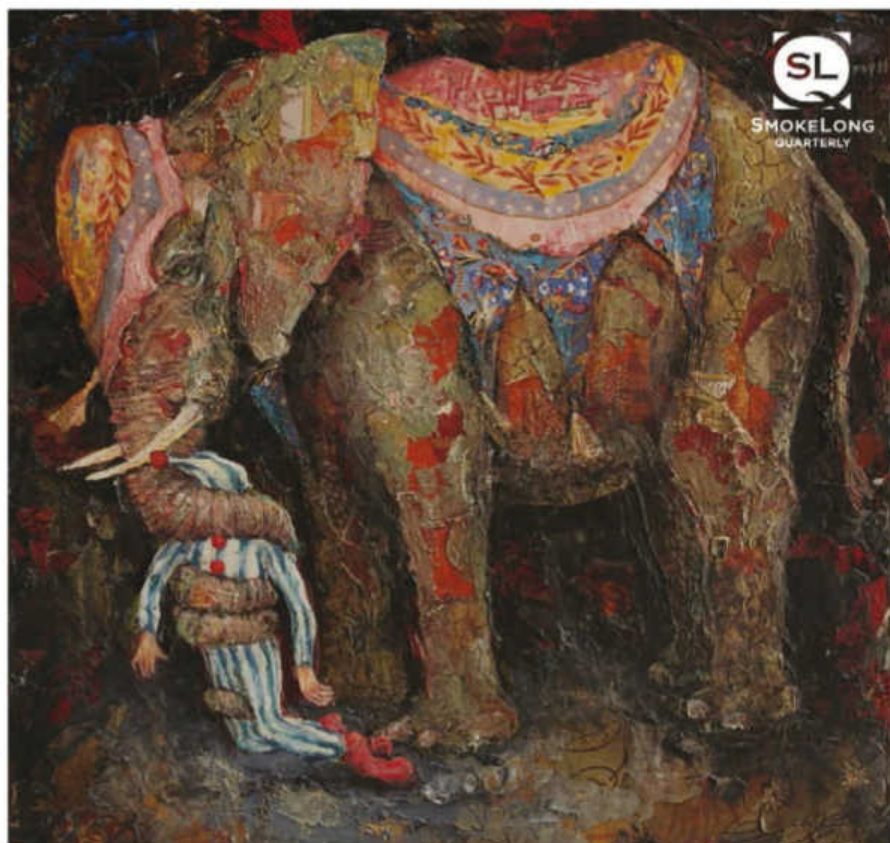
Advice for potential contributors

SmokeLong staff sees some submis-

sions that feel more like a piece of a larger story than a complete narrative. "There's a rhythm to flash fiction," Laskowski explains, "that drives it in a different way than a short story. When I'm reading a flash that has that rhythm, it's like there's a drum beat urgently thumping, moving me and the story forward. It's daring me to stop, knowing I can't. Every word and sentence matter and feel deliberate, calculated, raw."

When in doubt, potential contributors should immerse themselves in the genre. "Read flash fiction," Laskowski says. "There's so much out there, so many different forms, from experimental to prose poems to traditional narrative. There are a million ways of writing it." ■

Melissa Hart is a nonfiction instructor in the Whidbey Island MFA Program. She's the author of *Wild Within: How Rescuing Owls Inspired a Family* and *Avenging the Owl*.



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F = Fiction N = Nonfiction P = Poetry
C = Children's Y = Young adult O = Other

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Ticket to buy

Literary agents are frequently the middle men and women in the publishing food chain. Before approaching an editor or publishing house, it's a good idea to seek agent representation. Most agents follow similar submissions procedures, which we outline below, but always check with each one to see if he or she requires anything special.

- 1 Query letter:** The first communication with an agent, or sent in tandem with a proposal, this short letter should summarize your project, list your credentials and briefly speak about your target reader demographic.
- 2 For fiction:** Prepare a list of your previously published work, and have sample chapters ready to send. Sometimes agents request that these be sent along with the query, or they request them later. Either way, the sample chapters should not be drafts – they should be final or close to final and edited.
- 3 For nonfiction:** Whereas fiction is sold based on the finished product, nonfiction is sold based on the idea of a finished product. Because of this, nonfiction authors must create a book proposal, which consists of a book outline, chapter summaries, comparable titles, marketing strategies and often a sample chapter or two. Keep in mind that a proposal is your ticket to a deal, so you should devote a lot of time to developing one.

The following agents are a small sampling of what the industry has to offer. Find more listings at writermag.com.

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F N C The Bent Agency Commercial and literary fiction, memoir, nonfiction and children's literature. See website for specific agents' interests and email addresses. **Contact:** The Bent Agency, 19 W. 21st St., #201, New York, NY 10010. info@thebentagency.com
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F N O Beverley Slopen Literary Agency Literary and commercial fiction, history, narrative nonfiction, anthropology, biography and some true crime and self-help. **Contact:** Beverley Slopen Agency, 131 Bloor St. W., Suite 711, Toronto, ON, M5S 1S3, Canada. 416-964-9598. beverley@sloopenagency.ca
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FY Blue Ridge Literary Agency Romance, cozy mystery, historical, suspense, thriller and other sub genres, plus YA mysteries and contemporary romance. Email a synopsis and the first three chapters. **Contact:** Dawn Dowdle, Blue Ridge Literary Agency. query@blueridgeagency.com
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F NY BookEnds Currently considering romance, YA, mystery, science fiction and fantasy, new adult, middle grade and women's fiction. Also represents books on current affairs, reference, business, parenting, pop culture and general nonfiction. **Contact:** BookEnds. See website for individual agents' email addresses. bookends@bookendsliterary.com
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F N The Book Group Boutique agency founded in 2015 representing fiction and nonfiction. No poetry or screenplays. Email query and 10 sample pages (no attachments). **Contact:** The Book Group, 20 W. 20th St., Suite 601, New York, NY 10011. 212-803-3360. submissions@thebookgroup.com
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F N The Bukowski Agency Accepting fiction and nonfiction submissions from authors who reside in Canada. Send submissions by regular mail. **Contact:** The Bukowski Agency, 14 Prince Arthur Ave., Suite 202, Toronto, ON M5R 1A9, Canada. 416-928-6728. info@bukowskiagency.com
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F N Carol Mann Agency Represents general fiction, biography and general nonfiction. Submit queries by email. **Contact:** Carol Mann Agency, 55 5th Ave., New York, NY 10003. submissions@carolmannagency.com
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Katherine Heiny

Short stories haven't always received the attention or respect they deserve. Yet, the best short stories do what good novels do: Evoke emotion, connect characters and readers and include well-crafted dialogue. All in a short span. That's what the short stories of Katherine Heiny do in her collection, *Single, Carefree, Mellow*. She focuses on women and their relationships, but Heiny's work never reads as repetitive. Each story is unique and stands alone. Each one is infused with Heiny's nuanced, smart and witty prose. Her characters are not always likeable. There's infidelity, selfishness. But these darker sides make the stories more engaging and propel the plots forward. Her next project is a novel, and we asked her to talk generally about the craft.

Short stories

I started writing short stories when I was very young because they were easier for me to control. It seemed like less could go wrong than in a longer piece. Then I grew to love the other challenges and rewards of the short story – the way you have to be precise and condensed and make every word count.

Publishing

I had been publishing stories in literary magazines for about two decades before I ever thought of putting a collection together. I know that sounds disingenuous, but it's true. Everyone said story collections didn't sell, and it seemed easier just to keep writing stories than try to sell an unsellable manuscript. When I finally did assemble

the book, it sold very quickly and no one was more surprised by that than me.

Flawed characters

I think flawed characters *are* likeable, because people are flawed. It creates an instant sort of empathy. It's like when you read *Gone With the Wind* and Scarlett thinks that the worst thing about the war is how boring it is to hear everyone talk about it. You realize that she's selfish, and that makes her real.

Autobiographical elements

I'm far too lazy to ever keep a journal. Fortunately I have a good memory. And when I'm with my friends, we have endless conversations where we say, "Remember when that man sneezed on you in the elevator? Remember that time you woke up not knowing where



your purse was?" I'm sure it's incredibly boring for everyone else, but I love it.

Transitioning to a novel


The novel started out as a short story, and then it became a series of stories. Eventually I realized that what I was writing

were *chapters*. I found the idea of sitting down to write a novel too intimidating. I had to back into it. In many ways, writing a novel was like some really long family reunion. I had to get up and see the same people whether I wanted to or not. But in other ways, it was really, really fun.

Rejection

I still get rejections all the time. In a way, it's hard because a short story is so personal, and you send it off into the world and hope it does well. But it's all so subjective. I always figure if one editor didn't like a story, some other editor will. You can't take it personally, because it would be too easy to just stop submitting, and then where would you be?

Routine

I tend to work in the morning when I have relatively more energy, and I try to stay in my pajamas as long as possible because once I get dressed, I feel sort of empowered, and I'm more likely to go to the grocery store or the gym. I know this makes me sound like a sad, sad person, but it's the only thing that works for me. 



Allison Futterman has been published in *Charlotte* magazine and writes frequently for *The Charlotte Observer*.

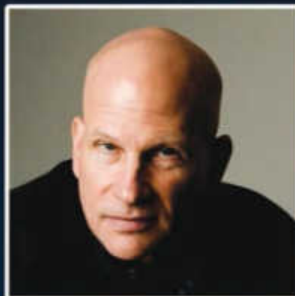
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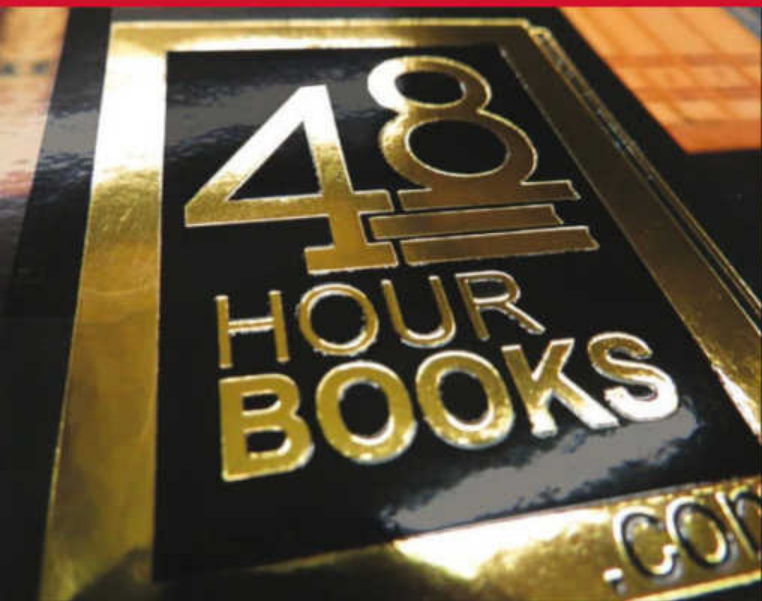
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Read three short stories by the runners up with comments from Colum McCann

A Wolf with Patience

BY BARBARA STARK-NEMON

2nd PLACE



"A gentleman is only a wolf with patience." Werner stood to the side and with a sweep of his arm, let the girl start up the stairs before him. His cavalier stance belied the pounding in his chest. Scanning the parlor, he noted the walnut furniture, rich brocade and etched glass lamps – all signifiers of a nobler past, before a red light bulb found its place in the street-level window. Another man sat on a divan across the room, legs splayed carelessly, knee bobbing. One hand covered his eyes, kneading his forehead, his whole body preoccupied with waiting for a night in a whorehouse.

Werner's practiced disinterest returned to the girl in the skimpy dress, wrong for the late September chill. He followed her up the staircase where an old brown dog and an older woman, faded like the end of autumn, looked down at them. The girl turned back to him.

"You don't have to be any kind of gentleman with me, captain," she offered, leaning her full bosom in his direction, even as her eyes skittered away. Werner nodded upward and she continued ahead of him, stopping only to accept a towel and room key from the old woman.

"I'm not going to be in a hurry," Werner said to the old woman as much as to the girl.

"You're paying," said the girl, flouncing into the room at the end of the dim hall.

"Yes, I am, and I'll be paying all night." Werner glanced at the alley below the window as the girl closed the door. "I told the Fraulein downstairs I wanted the best. I gave her extra not to

have to hurry. What makes you the best?"

"We could talk about it, or I could show you," she said, impertinence replacing her earlier hesitation. She drew the loose strap of her dress down over her shoulder, the mound of an ample breast revealed.

Werner stood still, only the glint in his eyes signaling desire, but it was enough. The girl approached. He pushed her thick blonde mane back and drew his finger down the milky skin of her neck, over the exposed top of her chest. He hadn't expected to enjoy the time he'd needed to buy.

"You're new. I haven't seen you here before," said the girl, as she unbuttoned his coat. "They aren't sending many new soldiers here anymore."

"And you don't sound like you're from around here at all," he replied, turning her around, his lips grazing her neck, his hands cupping her breasts from behind. *Stuttgart* he guessed. *Get her talking. Work her up at the same time...slowly.* His gun was strapped around his chest to the side. He needed to remove it, place it strategically.

"I'm from here now. That's all that matters, isn't it captain." She was smart and confident and careful, all with siren subtlety.

A German officer wouldn't say more. Werner was silent as he expertly slipped the dress off the girl. Boots scuffed down the hall and entered a room across the hall. *The restive boy from the parlor.* Karl listened as he kissed.

The girl swiveled her hips against him and he exhaled the quietest of groans. Holding her close with one hand, he used the other to shed his coat. With a quick twist the strap of his holster slid off his shoulder, and turning from the girl he draped the coat expertly over the gun and low-

Comments from Colum McCann

"A Wolf with Patience" by Barbara Stark-Nemon

This story very successfully follows the suggestion that it be concerned with "duplicious acts, binary oppositions, communication with the "other side," double indemnity." I felt I was in the hands of a stylish writer. I was taken with the phrase "an older woman, faded like the end of autumn." The character Karl Werner lives in the "lonely center of the starless night." It really is a story about a man hiding in plain sight. The ending is ambiguous – and perhaps a little rushed.

ered it to the floor. He drew the girl to the bed.

In an hour he lay damp next to the girl, his listening compromised by the sound of blood racing through his own veins and the hard breathing sighs beside him. The best of the house was an expert and interesting lover. He'd gotten what he'd paid for. He was hungry, and thought he'd made the girl hungry too. Drawing the bed cover around his waist, he unlocked the door and called to the old woman down the hall.

"Bring us some wurst or whatever there is here to eat. Beer if you can find it. Leave it at the door and knock." He turned back into the room, locked the door and retrieved a cigarette from his pants. He'd been careful to bring only the lousy Dutch Reemtsma cigarettes, even though there seemed to be Lucky Strikes everywhere among the German officers.

The girl lay on the bed, almost relaxed, he thought. Her eyes opened and before she could speak he said softly, "Sleep a while. We have a long night together." Seemingly satisfied, she closed her eyes and a small smile settled over her features.

Sophia! A stab of recognition caused Werner to inhale sharply, acrid cigarette smoke stinging his lungs. This girl resembled his parents' former housemaid, who had been his sexual tutor. Always aroused as a young adolescent, Werner had learned early the privileges of male members of their bourgeois household. Sophia had been respectful but assertive, drawing him in without making any demands. Hours with her had given him generous escape from the mounting disaster in Germany that eventually forced Sophia to leave, and Werner's family to escape Germany. In one brief year, she had taught him to freely enjoy himself, while artfully giving pleasure to a woman.

He was vigilant, just as he'd been in those days, listening for noises that signaled interruption, danger. Then it had been his parents returning from the opera. And now...

Food, surprisingly good homemade beer, another languorous episode with the girl in bed and, dangerously, a brief plummet into sleep brought Karl Werner to the lonely center of the starless night. The girl was snoring in earnest now, curled along his body.

In the silent dark, Werner summoned scenes of the previous thirty-six hours. At first, all had gone perfectly. He'd parachuted directly on target, five miles behind German lines. With his native tongue, and officer's uniform, he'd extracted from a forest warden the location of the anti-aircraft bunkers that were downing American planes. Then, he'd entered a camp as though he owned it, introduced himself with false papers and orders and from conversations at dinner in the officer's mess, he'd memorized details of a planned pullback in response to American pressure from across the Rhine. The talk was interrupted by a burst of agitation when a messenger brought news that a spy was likely nearby. A local

farmer, plowing corn stalks into his field, had found a buried parachute.

Werner had listened long enough to hear what was known about the spy: nothing beyond the parachute. The officers resumed their conversation and Werner stayed long enough to make his departure unremarkable. Rendezvous was still twenty hours away. He had all the information on troop strength and artillery placement that he'd come to ascertain, stored in the same clever mind that had been useless to him in school. He wanted to run, swim and disappear across the Rhine right now, but they'd be looking for the spy everywhere. He needed to buy a night and a day.

Of course. What had he learned early in counter-intelligence training? Use what you know from your former life to hide in plain sight. Where there were soldiers in a town, there were women to be had. He carried only the papers of a dead German intelligence officer named Karl Werner. That and a small roll of German marks would buy a night.

The girl stirred. Her hand moved across his hard belly but he caught it and pulled it behind her, rolling her onto her back. He leaned over her and buried his face in her generous bosom, chuckling as she became aroused. Then the ghost of a sound, the barest sigh of a scrape on a floorboard stopped him. He clamped his hand on the girl's mouth and put his finger to his lips. He motioned her to the far side of the bed, noiselessly gesturing for her to disappear into the space between the bed and the cupboard. As though she'd done it silently a hundred times, she was gone.

A soldier was in the room and shot before another moment passed, the broken door swinging on a single hinge. Werner charged into the hall and, finding it deserted, turned back into the room, dressed and ordered the girl to help him. American dollars appeared from a false pocket under his officer's insignia.

"You'll need this," he said. "The less you say, the better it will go for you."

Her shocked expression held a spark of interest. "Where are you from?" she asked as she pulled on her dress.

"Munich," he answered. "And you?"

"Stuttgart."

An hour later, Werner Rosenfeld slipped into the icy waters of the Rhine.

"You're new. I haven't seen you here before," said the girl, as she unbuttoned his coat.

BARBARA STARK-NEMON grew up in Michigan, where her family listening to family stories about life back in Germany. The stories became the inspiration for her first novel *Even in Darkness*. She lives, writes and does fiber art and photography in Ann Arbor and Northport, Michigan. "'A Wolf With Patience' hinges on a heightened sense of time and danger," says Stark-Nemon. "I found I had to return to every sentence, every word, until the writing was as taut as the character's vigilance."

Good for the Soul

BY BRENDA SINCLAIR SUTTON

3rd PLACE



The curtain rustled on the other side of the confessional. Worn leather creaked against old wood as some sinner knelt in the dark. Father Debhín sighed. He marked his place in the worn paperback, a gift from his brother Louis in America. The excellent Mr. Perry Mason had the case of The Haunted Husband nearly wrapped up, but the climax would keep until after vespers. The young priest slid the partition open and waited patiently for the penitent huddled in the shadows.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," whispered a tiny voice. "This is my first confession."

"Congratulations on your first communion then," said the priest.

"Back home our priest don't confirm us until we're twelve, unless we're dying, of course. It's two more years for me."

"Then go out from here, child. If, God forbid, you died this very night, your soul flies straight up to heaven, pure and unblemished. You're too young to know the difference between good and evil."

"I wish that were so, Father," said the girl, "but Mamai taught me that lesson, 'The Age of D...Dis...'"

"Discernment?"

"What you said. I know in my heart I done a terrible sin. If I should die before I wake, I'll surely burn in hell."

The way she whispered the word "burn" convinced the young priest to hear her out. "But you're no member of my parish."

"No, Father. Our family hailes from Mulinchasaigh, a few crofts on the road to Macroom. We cart our butter to the market here in Corcaigh. Mamai and me stands in Cornmarket Street to sell other wares."

He knew without looking and by the odor of sheep grease that a thick, fringed shawl of dark wool shrouded the child kneeling on the other side of the screen. Impervious to the Irish damp, it doubled as her blanket by

night. All the womenfolk who worked the stalls on that dog-legged street wore similar garb. Females filled the Coal Quay each Saturday to sell wee bits of everything; food, soap, old clothing, brooms, the occasional jug of potín. Headstrong, they refused their husbands' names at marriage. The father may be in doubt, but the mother always knew.

"Your mother's a shawlie then?"

"Grandmother, mother, sister and myself," said the girl with some pride. Through some system of their own devising, shawlies defended a daughter's pitiful inheritance, even if it was only a few square meters of public cobbles. "We've stood the same ground forever. If Mamai has her way, my granddaughters will stand there someday, too."

"Yours, and not your sister's?"

"She's scrubbing sheets for the Maggies up the Lee Road. Me and Mamai visited her this morning at The Good Shepherd."

No more needed saying. He bowed his head in a momentary plea to Holy Mary. Residence behind the red brick convent walls of Cork's Magdalene Laundry meant a bastard grew in the sister's belly. If she repented, if the family forgave and vouched safe, she might yet escape a life sentence of shame and sorrow. But freedom only ever came at a high cost, her newborn babe taken, sight unseen, straight to the convent's orphanage. No doubt, he'd be hearing the sister's confession soon enough.

"And tell me why you're confessing here to me, girl, and not to your own priest?"

The child cleared her throat. "Mine is a city sin."

"As opposed to what? A county sin?"

"It's as my sister taught me, Father. 'Wiser to confess horrible sins in the city where there's so much sin as not to be regarded at all. Leave the little sins for home,' she says."

He shook his head at their naive village logic and sighed. "Confession doesn't work that way, my child."

"But you'll absolve my sin," she pleaded, "because Father Michael won't listen to me. He's forbidden me to repeat my story at home, branded it a 'tall tale,' and says I must do the same or be called a liar from the pulpit. And I'm no liar, Father, I swear to God I am not!"

Comments from Colum McCann

"Good for the Soul"

by Brenda Sinclair Sutton

I never would have thought that I would find myself judging a story with priests and mermaids braided together. The story, while a little helter-skelter, is ambitious with its thematic concerns. I was a little concerned about the use of the Irish language, which wasn't always accurate, and some of the tropes had me a little worried, but in the end, the story unfolded nicely. This is a suspenseful tale about granting peace in the face of all the evidence. The writer took risks, which all good writers should do.

"Hush, now. Don't holler or the world will know your sin. So, tell me this story Father Michael says is a lie but is not a lie." The girl kept very still for a while, and he thought she might have slipped away.

Then her voice came quietly, "It's the mermaid, Father."

He gripped the arm rests of the chair and tried not to smile. "Half a woman and half a fish?"

"Well, she's not really a mermaid."

The priest relaxed.

The girl continued, "She has two legs when she wants them, and two fins when she needs them. She hunts the River Lee but she lives in the River Sulane that pours into the Lee, in a pool at the base of our waterfall. Folk say she's been there for ages. The fishermen all curse her for releasing their salmon... though she says that they really are her salmon."

The priest chewed the inside of his cheek, as he was visible to the child on his side of the confessional. "So what is this mermaid who is not a mermaid called?"

"I can't say her name because it's all squeaks and squeals. I call her the Green Lady, as she dresses in a gown of that colour when she's walking the land."

"And you've seen this mermaid often?"

"I talk to her all the time, Father. She comes when I play her whistle."

Cloth rustled, and a tiny hand held a tin whistle up to the grate. No, not metal at all, but more like buffed ivory. "I come from a long line of whistle players myself," he said. "I can't say that I've ever seen one quite like that before."

"And you likely never will," said the girl. "I'm pitiful when I play the thing, but when the mermaid plays it I hear the sound of a man crying. The Green Lady made it from the arm bone of her enemy."

"An arm bone, you say?"

"I don't 'say' it is an arm bone. It is an arm bone. Of the man who tried to build the first bridge over the River Lee. She warned him not to build it but he wouldn't listen, so she carried him off the bridge, straight under the water."

"She drowned him?" Oh, this tale was far better than his Perry Mason.

"Oh, no, Father, though she could have if she'd wanted to, she's that strong. He was handsome, her enemy, and she didn't want to kill him, just teach him not to meddle with her realm. She carried him to the grotto behind her pool."

"And he didn't drown on the journey?"

He heard a sigh from the behind the screen. "When you swim with her, you're able to breathe the water. It's only when she sets you adrift that you drown."

It was hard to keep incredulity from his voice. "And you know this because..."

"I've swum with her, Father, three – no, four times."

He should have cautioned her on the sin of lying – especially lying in the confessional – but her story intrigued him. He'd hear it to the end, then do his duty to God and the girl.

"Where to did you swim?" he asked.

"Always to the same place, Father; the grotto under the waterfall. She's lived there for the longest time. It's where she carries away her lovers."

"Like the man whose arm bone is not your whistle?"

The child laughed. "Oh, he was never her lover, Father – just a bad man who wanted to be a rich man, charging tolls to cross the river. She warned him, she did, not to build that bridge. She even tore it down twice by flood, and every time he built it back. So, she had no choice but to carry him away and bite off his arm."

"No choice," repeated the priest.

"None. You cannot build a bridge with only one arm. And worse, he could no longer play the fiddle. That broke his heart, and he never crossed her again. Good thing, too, or she would have taken a leg the next time, and he'd never dance again neither."

The priest and the girl sat quiet together. She squirmed. He cleared his throat.

"And how did you come to own her whistle?"

"Oh, I don't own it, Father," she said. "I'm only borrowing it until the Green Lady makes me my own whistle."

"Makes you your own! And whose arm will she be taking for it this time? Another bridge builder?"

"No, Father. She gave up on the bridge builders a long time ago. There must be a dozen or more bridges over the Lee now. But," she hesitated, "we're getting to the reason I'm here."

"Your terrible city sin."

"I told you that my sister is staying with the nuns," said the girl.

"When is her child expected?" he asked, granting her peace from common knowledge.

"In a few months, Mamai says. Sister is staying here in Cork because she wouldn't tell Mamai or Uncle or Father Michael the name of the baby's da. Even when they beat her. Even when they sent her to the laundry. She's saving that part of her truth for confession here in Cork. But before she left, she warned me to always bring a knife to bed. Made me swear not to tell another soul."

"Tell what?"

"The baby's da is our cousin Faelin. He and Uncle came to live with us when Uncle got hurt on the trawler. Faelin is an ugly brute, Father. His face is all spots and scars, and he smells of potín. Ní haon dóigh an fear sin."

"What? I'm sorry, I don't have much Irish."

"I'm just saying he's no man to be trifled with, Father. The dog came creeping into our loft at night, slipping into my sis-

"Oh, he was never her lover, Father – just a bad man who wanted to be a rich man."

ter's pallet. Faelin vowed he'd slit all our gullets, stem to stern, if she so much as squeaked. My sister kept silent until her belly swelled. Even then, she never spoke his name for fear of him burning the thatch over our heads in the night."

The priest shook his head. "And she made you promise to keep her secret?"

"Yes, Father, but I broke my word."

He nodded. "By being a good girl and telling me."

"No, Father, by telling the Green Lady. Once my sister was gone, Faelin crept to my bed. He waited until I was asleep. Stole the knife from under my pillow. Said I was safe because I'm just a girl and not yet a woman. Threatened me the same as my sister. I never told another soul, but Father Michael says mermaids have no souls.

"She's lying in wait tonight. When Faelin staggers from the shebin, he'll see her in her green gown. He'll hear her sweet voice call his name, beckoning him follow her over the bridge. Then she'll wrap him in her mighty arms, her flesh changing from skin to scales. She'll smile and show him many sharp teeth.

"I don't know how long she'll let him breathe before she takes his arm, Father, but very soon I'll be handing her back this whistle for one of my own. So, forgive me, for I have sinned. By my sin, I'm causing the death of my cousin. My sis-

ter's baby will never know its daddai, and that's no pity. Uncle will cry, but me, I won't shed a tear.

"And Father, I'll only play happy tunes on my whistle."

Silence ruled their shared space.

"Father?"

The priest whispered, "Say four Our Fathers and three Hail Marys. Go and sin no more." He prayed her absolution, heard the curtain rustle and the echo of footsteps skipping through the church. His own next confession would be...complicated.

The curtain moved again, prie dieu creaked and an older woman's voice croaked in the darkness.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been a week since my last confession. Father?"

BRENDA SINCLAIR SUTTON is a playwright and songwriter from Danville, Indiana. One of her plays won a radio play writing contest sponsored by NPR's Radio Mystery Theater. When not traveling the country with her husband teaching lyric writing workshops, she teaches Irish language and how to play the bodhrán, the Irish frame drum, at Irish Arts Academy of Indianapolis. "I spent decades studying the music, language, history, customs and the Irish people," says Sutton. "The Internet is great, but an extended visit to Cork, Ireland, led me to the Cornmarket open-air market. Being onsite helped sidestep a major mistake of misplacing the POV character, a Catholic priest, in an Anglican church."

White Rice

BY JOHN PHILIPP

HONORABLE MENTION



Evening offshore winds swept the fog from the California coast and toasted the air with ocean salt and pungent kelp. On a cliff high above the rumblings of the surf, surrounded by bent cypress trees, an old Spanish mission guarded the land. The wide mahogany doorway of the church framed a man and a woman in their mid-thirties, both dressed in white, hand-in-hand. They stood atop the Mission's adobe stairs and looked down on friends and relatives milling in the courtyard in themed 1930s garb – the women in long chiffon dresses and lace shawls, the men in blue blazers and straw boater hats circled with wide crimson bands. Opening

scents of night-blooming jasmine infused the air. From the bell tower, a red and white flag wigwagged at the becalmed ocean. The earlier prism of the sea's surface had shrunk to a small semicircle mirroring the sun's image as it slipped under the horizon, leaving behind – its wont on warm summer days – no sign of departure, no enlargement, no wind, no color, hint nor hue, erased like a forgotten childhood memory.

Two black-bow-tied waiters in white shirts and slacks distributed small silk rice bags tied with red velvet ribbons to the waiting guests. Tables of edibles, tented and unattended, loitered in silent submission, ready to be pillaged. Cadres of flying insects filled rosemary border hedges. They hummed to themselves, hovering for their turn at the food.

Night cloaked the rice paddies, reducing men to madness, raising cicadas to kings. An overcast sky masked the moon. Darkness was Tran Hgo's ally, absorbing his black

clothes, improving the choiceless chance he was about to undertake. His hand felt its way along the rough-timbered outside wall of the guard barracks. A symphony of snores from inside evidenced all was as he had hoped. He headed for the fields he'd left not three hours before.

Minh Ah opened her eyes as soon as Tran departed. She had not slept far from the edge of awake since the Viet Cong raided her village eight years before. An internal tear trickled across her heart. She worried for her husband and their children. She knew what he must do and the knowledge did nothing to lessen her dread. She slipped from her cot. Kneeling before a small ivory figure on a woven basket, she mouths a silent prayer.

Calf deep in slimy, black water, trapped in the musty, sulphuric scent, Tran worked by feel, light unnecessary for the habitual task. Cut, grab, slide the precious grain off its stalk and into the large muslin bag slung over his shoulder. Cut, grab, slide, cut, grab, slide, and again and again and again – smooth sweeps with the ani-ani knife.

Embedded in his harvesting rhythm, Tran remembered the day his father was taken, the rough, black-sashed soldiers who shot the first and only protestor. He remembered when the Cong returned to the village years later and carried him and the other young men away, and heard again his mother's wailing voice as he was led into the forest. His two sons had never known village life. They were born in this camp. They would die here.

Hours later Tran paused. Months of minimal food and sleep had weakened him. He removed two leeches from his leg with the ani-ani then hefted the bag, judged its weight and returned to his labors, slogging through the paddies that felt thicker since he'd broken his rhythm. With each meter trudged, the sack became heavier, harder to swing away from the blade stroke. Soon the bag would be full and he could rest, knowing the labor would feed and clothe his family until spring. That thought fought the night chill.

As the overcast curdled into clouds, Tran noticed the man perched on the bank, watching him harvest. Thinking the man a guard, Tran froze. But guards were an impatient lot. A guard would be barking orders – and Tran didn't see a gun glint in the shaft of moonlight that winked through the clouds.

He harvested a rice row in the man's direction. When close enough, Tran turned and bowed. He spoke softly. "A beautiful night."

The man looked around as if gathering evidence to evaluate Tran's statement. "For some things," the man answered in a low, steady voice. Tran couldn't place the accent.

The silence hung longer than comfortable. "Are you from here?" he asked.

The stranger stood. Tran now realized he was an elder, stooped at the shoulders and dressed in ivory cloth. The man slid his feet into the paddy water. Arms outstretched, palms open, he inched forward in small, cautious steps and placed one hand on Tran's shoulder.

"I am here for you."

The man's dark, deep-set eyes drew Tran as if his soul wanted to separate from his body and join the stranger's.

"You must leave here at the first hint of dawn. Not a moment later. They will be up early this morning." The stranger turned and walked away.

"Wait," whispered Tran. "Who are you?"

Still walking, the stranger answered, "I'm the one who stands on the basket." And he was gone, swallowed by the darkness.

Tran faced the eastern horizon. Fewer stars signaled the coming dawn. Yet, there was room left in the sack. Room for extra rice he could barter. He returned to his task, handling the ani-ani roughly, pausing after each downward stroke, summoning the strength to lift his arm for the next swing. Sweat stung his eyes, hampered his vision. Still he swung his blade down with the same force. He slipped in the mud. The knife sliced into the calf of his left leg. He screamed silently as bright red blood mingled with the murky, insect-infested water.

Tran dropped the ani-ani and gripped the top of the harvest bag with both hands. He tore off a piece of fabric. Balancing on his good leg, he lifted the slashed limb from the water and supported it on the bag. As he wrapped the wound, blood dripped unnoticed into the harvested grain.

He knew he should leave the field, wash the wound in a clear stream, return to his bed and sleep. Instead he stepped back into the filthy muck and resumed his work. He balanced on his right leg as he slid the white treasure into the sack. Inch by inch he wrestled the sustenance from the paddy's grip.

At the first whisper of morning light, Tran hefted the bag. Time to stop. In the disappearing darkness he dragged his damaged leg and his prize back to the straw hut.

Tran leaned the sack inside the door and looked over the compound to check that all was still.

The sun that had lightened the sky moments before was still not visible, hidden behind the fog rising off the warm rice paddies, tinted red, as the solar heat nibbled away the fog's flimsy substance. For a moment, Tran's whole world adopted a rosy aspect. Then it was gone.

He stumbled forward and collapsed on a cot. Freed from

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tasks, the waiting fever blossomed and consumed his body. Thoughts slid into the dark well of his mind. His leg throbbed, his sweat-wet body shivered, the wound's ripening smell rose.

At the sound of her husband's collapse, Minh Ah sat up and wakened in a single motion. Her glance took in the full shoulder bag, rice spilling out the open top, the festering wound, blood staining the floor, Tran Hgo's feverish head, his sweat soaking the bedding.

Outside, a gong sounded, harsh and intrusive. Work call. Five minutes to assemble in front of the cabins. Minh Ah held Tran's hand and prayed, repetitive, almost inaudible sounds directed at a small ivory figure atop a woven basket.

Tran opened his eyes at the sound of the gong but could not muster the energy to turn his head. He stared at the thatched ceiling as his wife continued to entreat their god. His lips moved.

"Hide the rice." His utterance was soft; the sounds ran together and entered the room unheard. Minh Ah dunked a rag in the water bowl and gently cleansed his wound.

He pushed her hand away. "Hide the rice," he repeated. His wife's hand tightened on his. She had heard but not understood. He lifted his arm to indicate the harvest bag. Instead his arm dropped off the cot, a pointing finger landed on the dirt floor.

Tran summoned the remaining energy in his body to his throat.

"Hide the rice!"

Loud banging at the door covered his words.

The newly wedded couple started down the adobe stairs under an engorged moon rising in the east. Scarlet-hued as it peeked over the coastal mountains, the moon slid along the color scale as it ascended toward ivory – its final destination. Rice flew into the air, lifting, swirling, sailing, the last light of day catching intermittent red facets in the grain. The celebratory spray tumbled, twirled and floated downward. Champagne flowed as a white shower sprinkled the sidewalk with kernels like drops of moonlight to wash away into the sea with the next rain.

JOHN PHILIPP writes a weekly humor column for six Marin County, California, newspapers and has won several national contests for his humor and memoir writing. He is working on a literary novel. "The structure of this story developed over four or five years," he says. "Originally I had versions in first- and third-person POV. Frustrated, I decided to capture just the essence of the story and build from there. Once I'd written the essence, the story felt complete as it was."

More from the blogosphere

Featured blogger Joanna Penn of thecreativepenn.com adds these additional tips for your blogging success.

You feature both craft blog posts and marketing posts.

What kind of a balance do you aim for between the two?

I started TheCreativePenn.com as a way to document my own lessons learned along the journey from first book to making a full-time living as an author, so over the last seven years, I've covered pretty much everything

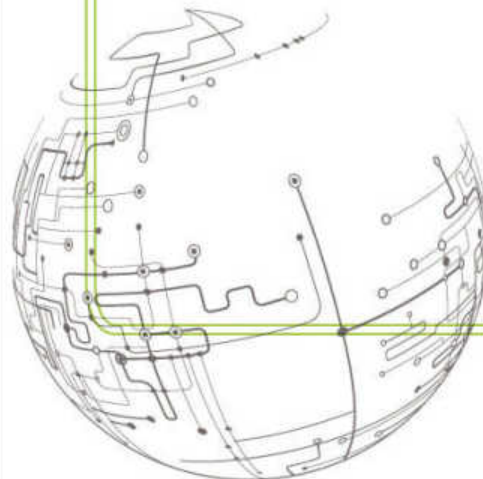
As my own process cycles between writing, self-publishing and book marketing, I aim to provide information on all those topics without repeating the same thing too often, alternating craft pieces with the business side. I don't consciously measure the number of posts on a topic, it's just based on what I'm interested in at that point in time and what my audience might need. For example, after NaNoWriMo, I post about editing a first draft, and in the new year, I focus on writing productivity.

Your blog posts get a lot of shares. I saw one with 2,000. Is there a science to a post that will have good legs?

The most important thing to consider is what your audience actually wants and then provide that, rather than just focusing on what you want to write. You should also learn how to write headlines, as copywriting is quite a different skill to writing a book. Adding images to your post is critical as well as an interesting visual will stand out much more on social media.

Then make it easy to share. If you have your own site, you can use sharing plugins such as Sociable or Social Warfare.

Of course, it also takes time to build an audience and the credibility where people will share your work immediately. I've been blogging for seven years and have more than 1,000 articles, 240 podcast episodes and 250 videos, plus years of social media sharing. But I started with nothing just like everyone else. Blogging, like being an author, takes time, so you have to decide what you want for the long term and why you're blogging in the first place.



Get out there

10 book promotion ideas for introverts.

BY KERRIE FLANAGAN



IF YOU'RE A HOME BODY, PROMOTING YOUR BOOK CAN BE ONE OF THE MOST DREADED PARTS OF THE PUBLISHING PROCESS. HERE ARE SOME TECHY WAYS TO SPREAD YOUR MESSAGE WITHOUT FEELING THE PRESSURE OF THE MASSES.

Host a Twitter chat. If you use Twitter, connect with your readers by hosting a one-hour chat about your book or a subject related to its content. Decide on the topic, the date and time, create a chat hashtag and invite people to get in on the discussion. socialmediaexaminer.com/how-to-host-and-promote-a-twitter-chat

Be a podcast guest. Podcasts are popular, and many include interviews as part of the show. Find the podcasts you think your ideal reader would listen to and approach the host about being a guest. The interviews are usually done over the phone and are aired at a later time. Here are lists of podcasts from iTunes and Podomatic: itunes.apple.com/us/genre/podcasts/id26?mt=2 podomatic.com/trending/categories

Create a Pinterest board. Include a photo of your book cover and other images related to the subject matter. For instance, if your book takes place in Colorado, include photos of mountains, skiing, hiking and beer. You can even invite other pinners to add to the board.

Make a book trailer. A book trailer entices readers to pick up your book and read it. Trailers are a great marketing tool, because they can be posted on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. Some free programs to help you create your own include Animoto, Prezi and Photoshow. animoto.com prezi.com photoshow.com/home/start

Develop a quiz. Engage readers by creating questions about events from your book, the setting, the characters, the topic...anything. Then use a program like Qzzr or Quiz Works to make the actual quiz. Share the quiz on your social media platforms. qzzr.com onlinequizcreator.com

Do a giveaway. Hosting a giveaway on GoodReads will help get your book gain valuable exposure. You decide how many books you want to give away and the duration in which people can sign up. goodreads.com/giveaway

Explore Book Crossing. This worldwide library encourages books to be passed around and is a great way to reach new readers. Each book gets a sticker and a special tracking number so members can follow the journey of all the books, connect with other readers and review books. bookcrossing.com

Hold an Instagram contest. Build your author presence on Instagram by hosting a contest. It can be as easy as having people like an image or a little more involved with collecting emails from participants. Here are directions on how to organize the contest: socialmediaexaminer.com/run-successful-instagram-contest

Brand with quotes. Pull inspiring and fun quotes from your book to create quote images you can post on Pinterest, Facebook or Twitter. This will help you brand your name and books. Some programs to help you make the images include BeHappy.Me, Quozio, Quotes Cover and PixTeller. behappy.me quozio.com quotescover.com picteller.com

Use SlideShare. This platform, part of LinkedIn, lets authors create a slide show related to their book: how the book was made, what the book is about or a related topic related. The slide show will be housed on SlideShare, but can be shared on other social media platforms. slideshare.net

